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ABSTRACT

This report presents results from a study that examined homework issues and practices by surveying teachers, students, and parents in 13 schools in different parts of Scotland. The first of the report's 10 chapters outlines background information and the research strategy used in this study. In chapter 2, findings of previous research on homework are summarized. Chapter 3 describes the purposes of homework from the perspectives of teachers, students, and parents. The findings of the study are presented in chapters 4 through 10, and address the following questions: Is homework worthwhile? What is the nature of homework? How long do pupils spend on homework? What is the environment of homework? What is the role of parents in monitoring and support? and What principles lead to better homework practice? An appendix provides policy principles, based on the study's findings, on the following: (1) school policy; (2) homework tasks; (3) teacher's management of homework; (4) communication with parents; (5) parent workshops; (6) the school board; (7) strategies for independent learning; (8) sanctions; (9) teacher training and staff development; and (10) regional policy. (MM)

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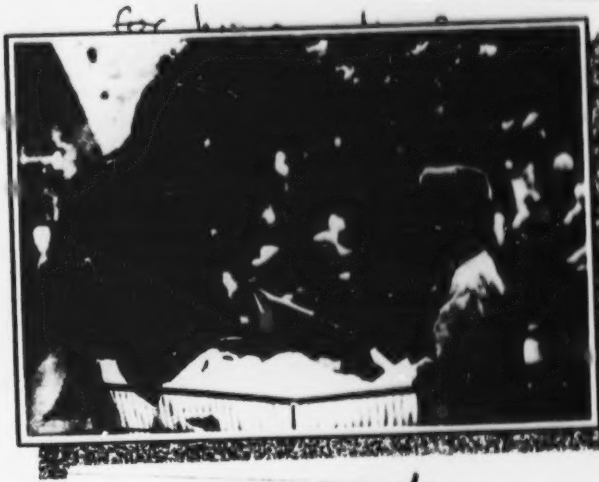

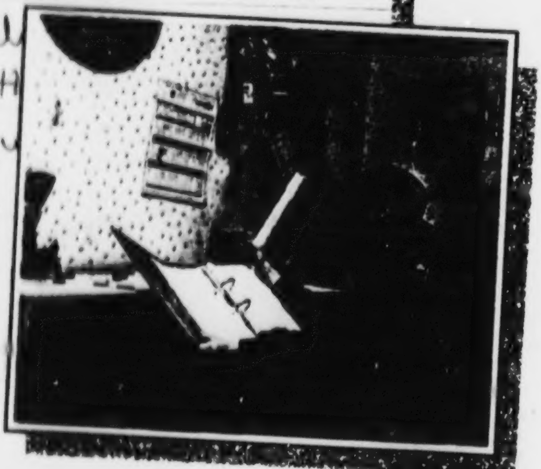

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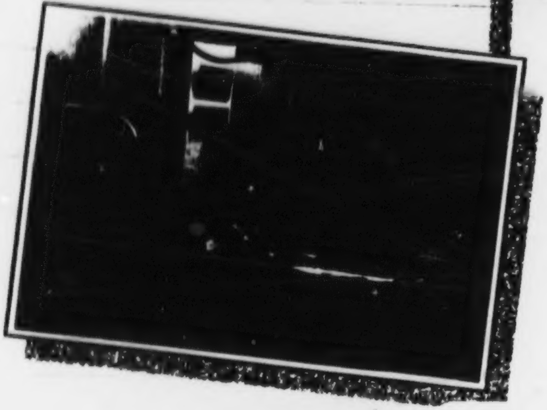

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Learning out of school

homework, policy and practice

A Research Study commissioned
by the Scottish Education Department

Carried out at Jordanhill College

Our thanks to the thirteen schools who made this study possible,
and to the authorities who supported the work.

We would also like to thank all other schools and individuals
who gave us help and advice.

John MacBeath
Mary Turner

November 1990

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Chapter 1

The research - background and approach

What is homework?

Homework is a word that is loaded with connotations and which encompasses a range of definitions. In its narrowest sense it can refer to a specific set task (such as learning five spelling words) to be completed at home in a given time and with clear expectations about standards of performance. In its broadest sense it can refer to learning which takes place outside school, undertaken over an extended period of time and at the discretion of the learner (for example, becoming more aware of the environment). It may presuppose a child working independently, or it might be supervised or guided by an adult. It may be a collaborative effort of a group of young people or it might refer to tasks which require the co-operation of a parent or sibling. It may be done at home, in the library, in the street, in the park, at the cinema, in the school itself or anywhere that is appropriate to the task or the needs of the individual.

A definition of 'homework' has to cover a range of possibilities but recognise the common features. Such a definition would refer to learning:

- that is relevant to teachers' curricular objectives
- which takes place outwith formal classroom teaching
- which is primarily the responsibility of the learner himself/herself

Homework is controversial because it is the most difficult and complex form of learning to prescribe or evaluate. Because homework goes home, and goes home to such a variety of social contexts, it is almost impossible to determine what will influence the child in a positive or negative way, and whether work done without teacher supervision will benefit or harm motivation and learning.

While homework is often spoken about, or written about, in very negative terms, there are few who believe that education should be restricted to the school, and antipathy to homework is often a reaction against its narrowest definition, and against ritualistic work undertaken by children as a matter of duty rather than with any intrinsic interest or tangible benefit. Much of the work most valued by teachers is a product of pupils' own initiative, motivated by classroom learning and carried through by pupils in their own time and sustained by their own enthusiasm.

This ambivalence and these contradictions stem in part from the lack of attention given to the subject of homework. It receives very little attention in pre-service or in-service college courses, and does not play any significant role in schools' planned activities and staff development. Nor has homework been given as much attention in educational literature and research as many other aspects of school and home life.

Where is the evidence?

Nonetheless, there have been in the last five years some studies which have attempted to determine whether homework is in fact beneficial, typically measuring homework against levels of achievement. These studies have been mainly American, and although with considerable relevance their direct applicability, has been limited by their cultural context. In England there have been studies such as Michael Rutter's which examined homework as a variable related to school effectiveness, [1] and in 1987 there was a DES Inspectorate report on the subject. These documents provide important insights, but also require caution in translation to another educational system and set of social expectations. [2]

There have been comparative European studies illustrating quite dramatic differences in policy on homework. In Belgium, for example, homework is not permitted below the age of 10, and in Spain is expressly forbidden by law in all schools. Luxembourg sets a maximum of 30 minutes in first year. Many countries provide no national guidelines or legislation about practice. The only existing policy in Scotland are the 1982 Regulations (School and Placing Information) which require schools to include homework in their general information to parents. [3]

> *"Each school produces its own handbook, which includes information on homework."*

In Scotland homework has been a neglected field of research, although there have been pointers from a number of studies which suggested that this was a subject which deserved much closer scrutiny. For example the 1988 Assessment of Achievement Programme in Mathematics project found that among schools which set an upper limit for mathematics homework in S2 the suggested limit varied from 10 minutes to 2 hours per week. [4]

The 1989 national survey of parents views of school education in Scotland included the subject of homework and pointed to quite significant problems of communication between school and home. It not only clearly indicated a need for further research focused specifically on homework, but also the need for research which would compare parental views with those of teachers and pupils. [5]
It concluded that:

- there were wide variations in the amount and frequency of homework reported by parents
- there was a lack of consistency in practice between and within schools
- there was a general failure to explain homework to parents
- for most parents the amount of homework was "about right" but for others it was insufficient, erratic or difficult to ascertain
- most parents would have welcomed a more consistent statement of policy from the school

Following the survey, the Scottish Education Department announced funding for a study on homework which would follow up some of the leads of the 1989 survey, but which would also widen the perspective and reach some conclusions about good practice and policy-making.

This study, which is a consequence of that SED initiative, set out to do a number of things:

- to describe the range and quality of homework undertaken by children in Scottish primary and secondary schools
- to identify homework issues of concern to teachers, parents, and pupils
- to identify 'good practice' drawing on these three sets of perspective

This chapter describes the methodology and approach to the research. Chapter 2 summarises some of the findings of previous research into homework. Chapters 4 to 10 present the findings of this study, while the annex offers a set of policy principles which arise out of the findings.

Research strategy

The research set out to explore a number of questions, including the following:

- What are the different purposes served by homework?
- How are these purposes communicated a) to pupils?
  b) to parents?
- What is the relationship between what children learn at school and at home?
- What kind of homework tasks are most appropriate at different stages of primary and secondary?
- Are there optimum times that should be spent on homework at different stages?
- How can homework meet different needs?
- How can parents be helped to support and monitor homework?
- How should homework be managed and monitored by teachers?
- What are the implications for 'good practice'?

In order to find the answer to these questions it was decided to examine in depth a number of schools in different parts of Scotland, concentrating on schools which had already gone some way along the road to developing homework policies. In consultation with HMI and Directors of Education, seven primary and six secondary schools were identified in Highland, Grampian, Lothian, Central, and Strathclyde regions. These schools were then contacted by the researchers to ask if they would be willing to participate in the study, and interviews then arranged with the headteacher to discuss the research strategy.

The thirteen schools were not selected as a random or representative sample of all Scottish schools, but in many respects they are 'typical' schools. They include schools in a mining village, a new town, an affluent city suburb, an area of deprivation, and a remote Highland area. They include schools with a high level of parental involvement and schools with very little involvement of parents. They include denominational and non-denominational schools.

The study set out to explore the views and experiences of the three main sets of 'players' - teachers, pupils, and parents. A sample of each of these groups was asked to fill out a questionnaire, and a follow-up interview was conducted with a sample of those who responded to the questionnaire. The content and format of questionnaires was discussed beforehand with headteachers and suggestions and modifications incorporated.

In addition to the questionnaire, a sample of pupils was asked to keep a diary over a period of a week, recording what they did for homework, how long it took them, what difficulties they encountered and who helped them, if anybody. The diary also asked them to record how they spent the rest of their time (for example, going to the cinema, going out to play, watching television) and how long they spent on each activity.

The administration of the questionnaires was discussed with headteachers and a strategy worked out. Questionnaires were then circulated to teachers, pupils, and parents, in each case ensuring that returns were treated in confidence.

The pupil questionnaire was administered by giving it to all pupils in one class at each stage from primary 5 to secondary 6. In addition half of each class from primary 5 to secondary 6 was asked to complete a homework/leisure diary for one week. The other half of the class took the parent questionnaire home for completion by parents. Half of the schools administered the questionnaires and diaries in June, the other half in September (the best arrangement for a project which ran from April to November).

Parents were given the option of posting the questionnaire back to the school or sending it directly to the researchers (which about 5% did). A space was provided for parents and pupils to give their names if they were agreeable to a follow up interview. About 60% of pupils and 65% of parents gave their name. Teacher questionnaires were given to all teachers, and returned confidentially through the head or depute head.

The rate of return varied considerably from school to school. For pupils it ran close to 100%, although the diaries presented more of a problem and the return rate dropped from nearly 100% in primary to around 60% in upper secondary). The rate of return from teachers varied from close to 100% in primaries to between 60% and 90% in secondary schools. Parent returns varied from between 60% and 90% in the seven primaries and 25% to 60% in the six secondaries. The lowest parent return was in a secondary school in an area of deprivation with a very widely scattered population.

Questionnaire returns were received from 1,011 pupils, 204 teachers, and 613 parents. Diaries were completed by 452 pupils. Given the open-ended nature of the diary each one had to be coded separately, as did questionnaires which contained a number of open-ended questions. These were then analysed by primary and secondary, by year group, by individual school, by teaching subject, by occupational group of parents, and by sex of pupils.

In seven of the schools (four primaries and three secondaries) interviews were conducted with a small sample of pupils, teachers and parents, each interview lasting about half an hour. These interviews allowed the researchers to explore:

- some of the written answers to the questionnaires
- individual experiences, problems or difficulties
- perceptions of good and bad practice

Interviewees were also given some feedback on what the research was at that point revealing, and asked for their comment and interpretation. Since teachers were normally the last to be interviewed in a school, researchers were able to feed back to them some of the issues arising both generally in the research and specifically in their own school. This process proved extremely valuable in offering not only three sets of perspectives but three sets of interpretations of those perspectives. It also proved a useful method for checking out hypotheses and clarifying ambiguities. Interviews were conducted with 175 pupils, 116 teachers, and 69 parents.

Visits were also made to other schools outwith the case study sample as a form of cross reference or in order to follow up specific issues. These included primary and secondary schools in multi-racial communities, a suburban high school with a high rate of placing requests, and a primary school serving one of the most deprived communities in Scotland. The researchers also interviewed members of the Directorate, Advisorate and HMI.

A desk study was also made of school handbooks, homework policies, and parent homework guides, and of the research and literature on the subject. This included studies carried out in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Europe. In conjunction with another study one of the researchers was able to visit two Canadian and American schools and talk to a number of Canadian and American researchers, headteachers, and teachers.

Interpreting the data

All of this yielded a huge amount of data. In some cases this pointed to some quite unambiguous conclusions, for example in the amount of time spent on homework at different school stages, when and where it was done and which topics or subjects were most common.

While a lot of the data referred to attitudes and expectations it was again often unequivocal, illustrating a view strongly shared by a majority - for example parents' belief in the value of homework. On a number of issues too, there was a strong consensus among all parties - teachers, pupils and parents.

Where this kind of evidence exists, it is easy to draw conclusions and make some firm suggestions about implications for policy and practice. More typically, though, the data did not provide such crisp and clear evidence. Teachers differed, for example, in their views on the purposes of homework, and in their attitudes to sanctions for failure to complete it. Further analysis revealed not only differences between primary and secondary teachers, but differences between one primary school and another and between one secondary and another. It also revealed differences of view among staff within the same school or within the same secondary department.

The existence of such differences may, in some circumstances, be seen as welcome, but the fact that they exist has implications for policy and practice. For example, from a parent or pupil point of view, it is crucial to know whether or not the school as a whole supports the use of sanctions for failure to do homework.

The statistics presented are in all cases based on the 13 schools studied, and there is no claim that these reflect the Scottish situation as a whole. For that reason, and because their meaning was in part determined through interpretive interviews, tests of statistical significance have not been presented. The focus of the study is to consider where similarities and differences of perspective within or between schools might lead us, and what the policy implications might follow.

Summaries are presented at the end of each chapter and the final two chapters advance some examples of, and suggestions for, good practice which seem to the authors to flow from an examination of what parents, pupils and teachers said. Those conclusions are not always a simple reflection of a majority view, but rest on an interpretation by the researchers of the logic, rationale and consequences of different policies and practices.

In order to test the validity of these interpretations and conclusions, drafts of the report, or sections of it were discussed with HMI, researchers, advisers, headteachers and teachers. As the research progressed, hypotheses were also tested out with pupils and parents.

In the final analysis, it is impossible to escape from value judgement and selectivity in the presentation of evidence. Hopefully though, this rests on some consensus about educational objectives and priorities, and how these can be most effectively realised in and out of school.

The thirteen schools

The sketchy detail and fictitious names of the 13 schools outlined below is in order to protect the promise of confidentiality given at the outset of the research study.

Maplegrove Academy - A secondary school of about 900 pupils serving a large city owner-occupied suburb, including some very wealthy families.

Greylands High - A secondary school of about 800 pupils serving a rural area of villages and small holdings with a high proportion of deprived families.

St John's Townships - A denominational secondary school of 700 pupils, serving a rural population scattered over a wide area of farmland, small townships, and including areas of deprivation.

Inverisles Secondary - A secondary school of about 200 pupils in the Highlands, serving a scattered rural area, where the main occupations are crofting, fishing and tourism.

Forges Secondary - A secondary school of 850 pupils serving a cluster of industrial towns, and with 15% of the school population from areas of priority treatment.

Northcity High - A denominational secondary school of 320 pupils serving a city suburb and four surrounding towns. Occupational groups include professional people, farmers, hoteliers and artisans.

Meadowpark - A primary school of 440 pupils, serving an owner-occupied housing estate on the edge of a central Scottish town.

Coalburn - A primary school of 400 pupils in a mining village and serving council estates with a high rate of unemployment.

Eastforth - A primary school of 450 pupils serving a council estate in a small town in east central Scotland.

Northeastern - A Highland primary school of 200 pupils serving a city suburb and a council housing estate.

Beinn Froach - A Highland primary with less than 100 pupils serving a village and surrounding crofting and fishing communities.

Newstreets- A denominational primary school of 260 pupils serving a part of a new town, comprising Scottish Homes, and a village of mainly owner-occupied housing.

Eastcape - A primary school of 325 pupils in a small holiday town serving a mix of owner-occupied and council housing.

Chapter 2

What does previous research suggest?

Much of the research conducted into homework has attempted to establish whether homework is actually beneficial or, in fact, counterproductive. The questions around which that research has tended to revolve are:

- does it raise achievement?
- does it increase motivation?
- does it develop skills and affect attitudes?
- is it discriminatory? (does it benefit some and penalise others)

Does homework raise achievement?

A recent study compared England, Wales and Northern Ireland on time spent on maths homework as against performance on standardised mathematics tests. In Northern Ireland where the majority of pupils did maths homework, achievement levels were, in every area, ahead of England and Wales where pupils did less homework. [6]

The weight of evidence from American research indicates that academic achievement is related to time spent on homework. Regardless of ability, social class, sex, or race, the conclusion is that homework has a positive effect.

> *"What also makes time spent on homework of particular interest is that it is a potential influence on achievement which is open to change. Unlike characteristics such as ability and social background, the time a pupil spends on homework is very flexible. It will be influenced by decisions a child makes him/herself, but will also be influenced by the school and by parents."* [7]

This may not be simply a product of homework in itself but of the expectations that are associated with it. Where teachers set high standards for schoolwork, and for after school work, pupils tend to do better [8] These beneficial effects are even more likely when homework is consistently marked or commented on by teachers. [6] Greater effort on homework is also related to higher expectations of parents and peers, both of which are closely related to what the school as a whole is trying to achieve.[8]

> *"Where children were set homework, were encouraged by parents to do it, and had it regularly marked at school, there was 'a steady consistent association between that and the level of performance'."* [6]

Homework may also compensate for low achievement according to American and English evidence. One American study concluded that low ability pupils who did regular homework got higher average grades than more able pupils who did no homework at all. [9] A longitudinal 5 year study of 79 pupils in one English grammar school concluded that there was a strong correlation between exam achievement and time spent on homework, particularly in the case of working-class pupils. [7]

There is an even stronger case made for the benefits of homework in the early years of primary. It is commonly argued that, in the long term, achievement rests on the base of competence and confidence in reading, writing, and number work, and on an intrinsic interest and enthusiasm for learning founded in early childhood. For this to develop there needs to be support and encouragement for systematic learning outside the classroom.

Some schools are effective in helping parents to use the home environment and domestic routines for conceptual and skill development so that what happens in the classroom complements home learning rather than vice-versa.

> *"Home is an especially effective learning environment and is, in some senses, superior to the school for young children. The range of activities is greater than in school and these activities have direct significance for the child; the mother can give more individual attention than can a teacher and has a close, often intense, relationship with the child."* [10]

Summaries of homework research suggest that the relationship between homework and higher achievement is strongest where the following conditions are met:

- The task is appropriate to the pupil's level of ability
- The task is linked to ongoing work in the classroom
- The teacher gives recognition and feedback to completed work
- There is some degree of parental involvement

Does homework increase motivation?

It may be argued that raising achievement in school tests or examinations is a short term benefit and not necessarily related to long term educational development. A more acid test of homework might rest on whether or not it increases motivation to learn and encourages young people to assume ownership for learning.

It is argued by some that, in fact, homework does not do this. One English study reported that pupils saw neither extrinsic nor intrinsic benefits in homework and did it for no other reason than that it was required. While 50% of pupils said that they enjoyed school only 2% said they enjoyed homework.

> *"Unmotivated by either an intrinsic interest in what they were doing or by the acceptance of homework as a means to an end, most pupils obtained little satisfaction from their independent study beyond the immediate relief at getting it done."* [11]

This study went on to argue that homework is counterproductive and that the experience of frustration and failure had a detrimental effect on pupils' motivation. A lot of researchers conclude that repetitive, uninteresting homework tasks not only contribute little to what pupils actually learn but detract from how they feel about what they are learning.

It is also argued that homework is often a domestic battleground. For some children the long shadow of unpalatable schoolwork seems to reach even into their homes and their relationships with their parents. This is exacerbated where teachers have failed to explain homework adequately and children and parents end up mutually frustrated and blaming one another for their lack of comprehension. The fact that homework time is bought at the expense of TV time or time with friends adds little to its palatibility, and the use of extra homework as punishment, and the ultimate reward - no homework - serve to reinforce this negative perspective.

However, while there appears to be no research to support the case that homework increases motivation, teachers, pupils, and parents can all cite individual instances where imaginatively constructed and well managed homework does, in fact, have that effect. It can also be argued that the strongest motivator is raised achievement, and that students who study hard and as a consequence get better results, will enter a virtuous circle of reward and motivation.

Does homework develop responsibility and skills of independent study?

One of the benefits of homework most consistently cited is that it instils self discipline and develops skills for working independently. In one American study, for example, 78% of parents and 88% of teachers said that the most important benefit of homework lay in developing children's initiative and responsibility. Schools frequently emphasise this as one of the salient virtues of homework. It is much more difficult, however, to find any study to substantiate this assertion. One of the few studies of this aspect of homework, (an English study of 846 13-16 year olds) concluded:

> *"Perhaps the biggest surprise was to find that no development appeared to take place between the ages of 13 and 16 in most pupils' understanding of the role of homework in their education - or in their ability to cope with independent study.... They appeared neither to have been shown, nor to have acquired for themselves, the means of organising and managing their independent learning successfully and therefore had not experienced the genuine pleasure and sense of achievement that provide the best self-motivation and commitment to study."*

The author of the research concludes, however, that this not an indictment of the value of homework, but of teacher management which fails to provide useful and rewarding activities.

> *"The most obvious failure of the homework system as it affected the 846 pupils involved in the research was in creating situations in which pupils could succeed.*
>
> *By far the most common problem was a breakdown in communication between teacher and pupil, resulting in an inadequate understanding of what the homework task entailed. Insufficient guidance, hurried instructions (often issued against a hubbub of noise after the bell had gone), a lack of opportunities to ask questions and seek clarification, assignments unrelated to classwork and inadequately explained - these were repeatedly cited as the cause of difficulties that arose during the evening's work."* [11]

This observation seems to be well borne out by studies in other countries. A Dutch study in 1984, for example, found that in 94% of cases, homework was given at the end of the lesson, half of the time after the bell had rung, and in 9% of cases during the ringing of the bell. [12]

Most studies conclude that homework should be more of an integral part of teaching and learning, that it should be more carefully structured and communicated, and that there should be guidance on how to make the most of homework.

Is homework discriminatory?

Research findings tend to agree that there is a strong positive relationship between parental education and homework done by their children. In other words, the more formal education that parents themselves have had the longer their children spend on homework. There is also a strong positive relationship between parental aspirations and time spent by children on homework. Evidence also suggests that those who spend most time on homework and benefit most from homework are the high achievers - most likely to come from homes of either high-achieving parents or parents with high aspirations. This is sometimes described as the 'home curriculum' and is described in one source as follows:

> *"The home curriculum includes informed parent-child conversations about everyday events, encouragement and discussion of leisure reading, monitoring and joint analysis of televiewing, deferral of immediate gratification to accomplish long-term goals, expressions of affection and interest in the child's academic and personal growth, and caprice and serendipity. This curriculum, like the one in school, varies in both amount and quality; both are important and multiply one another's effects."* [8]

Not only are pupils who achieve highly most likely to get most support and help at home but on top of this they are also the ones most likely to get support and encouragement from their teachers. There is considerable evidence to show that teachers tend to reinforce and further exaggerate differences between high and low achievers by their differential expectations.

> *"On the one hand, teachers and peers set higher standards for students who appear to be more able to deal with a challenge ie high-ability students, students with high expectations, and students enroled in a college preparatory track. On the other hand, parents set higher standards for students who appear to be less able to deal with a challenge ie low-ability students, students with low educational expectations, and students not enroled in a college preparatory track."* [8]

All of this points to homework playing a major part in that complex of factors which create success and failure. However, there is also evidence to suggest that there is a stronger relationship between time spent on homework and raised achievement among children from working-class, than middle-class families, and the more pupils are actually disadvantaged within the classroom, the greater the potential for grogress outwith the classroom, especially where that supplementary study is structured and supported. Such research suggests that attempts to equalise opportunity by the abolition or minimalisation of the role of homework are misguided. In other words, rather than trying to flatten the obstacle course, more attention should be paid to helping pupils to surmount the hurdles. One American study concluded on the basis of a study of 26 blue-collar parents.

> *"Homework gave these parents a window on their children's schoolwork and sometimes led them to talk to the teacher. Such contacts may have improved the children's chances for success at school: teachers expected more of boys and girls whose parents sought them out."* [13]

Race and gender may also be differentiating factors. American research has found no correlation between race and achievement but does suggest that on the one hand, girls do more homework than boys, but on the other that parental expectations are lower for girls. The explanation for this is likely to be found in broader cultural attitudes and attitudes to school work in general. There have been many studies concerned with the differential expectations of pupils, teachers and parents with regard to gender and how abilities and appropriate 'boy' and 'girl' school subjects are perceived. Data for this study including sex of pupils, allowed some further analysis of this question. [14]

Other interesting leads from previous research were also taken up in this study, including the purposes and value of homework, enjoyment and achievement, parental support, motivation and independent study. While much of the American and English research findings are strongly supported by this study there are also quite marked differences, particularly in respect of enjoyment and motivation, and the overall value of homework as perceived by parents, pupils, and teachers.

Chapter 3

What are the purposes of homework?

School policy handbooks and brochures for parents usually include some statements about the purposes of homework. Most commonly these are in terms of reinforcement of learning, and instilling good habits and self-discipline. There are, however, many other purposes mentioned:

- allowing practice and consolidation of work done in class
- allowing preparation for future classwork
- offering access to resources not available in the school
- developing skills in using libraries and other learning resources
- providing opportunities for individualised work
- allowing assessment of pupils' progress and mastery of work covered
- providing evidence for the evaluation of teaching
- training for pupils in planning and organising time
- developing good habits and self-discipline
- encouraging ownership and responsibility for learning
- providing information for parents
- providing opportunities for parental co-operation and support
- creating channels for home-school dialogue
- fulfilling the expectations of parents, pupils, teachers, and public

But what do teachers, pupils, and parents see as the purposes?

1) Teachers

Teachers were asked to describe what they saw as the most important purposes served by homework. Many gave up to three or four purposes. Their responses are summarised in the following table:

"The most important purposes served by homework"

% of teacher responses (including multiple responses)

n = 292

	Primary (% of total responses)	Secondary (% of total responses)
link between home and school	25	0
reinforcement/review/practice	24	50
involvement of parents	16	5
enrichment/extension	16	10
good study habits	12	5
independent work/self reliance	3	7
diagnostic purposes	0	4
finishing unfinished work	1	5
preparation for future classwork	1	4
other	2	10

Responses in the *other* category included ***reading, developing evaluation skills, concentrating on weaknesses and difficulties, using non-school resources,*** and ***exploring the environment,*** for example. One of the illuminating aspects of these responses is the wide range they cover, and the differences between primary and secondary teachers.

Reinforcement, review, or further practice of class work was by far the most common reason for homework given by secondary teachers. While primary teachers also saw reinforcement as important they were more likely to emphasise homework as useful in building links between teachers and parents, and in involving parents in their child's work. That emphasis is most graphically illustrated by the comment of one primary teacher:

> *"The most important thing we can do is get parents into the classroom to see and get a feel for what's going on. Then only can they appreciate what their child is doing at home and how it relates to her learning and development."*

However, differences from one primary to another were sometimes more marked than the similarities. The following table compares five primary schools on five different objectives of homework.

"The most important purposes served by homework"

(% of teachers responses including multiple responses)
n =94

	Meadowpark	Eastforth	Northeastern	Beinn Froach	Newstreets
reinforcement	67	18	42	33	0
parental involvement	0	18	33	3	38
home/school links	0	36	0	27	63
study habits	0	9	8	7	0
enrichment	0	9	8	27	0
other	33	10	4	3	0

The spread of different views within one school, and the clustering of similar views in another is a striking feature of this table. In Eastforth Primary teachers each seem to have their own view, while in Newstreets Primary all teachers subscribe to the same aim of building parental involvement and home-school links. In Meadowpark this aim is not mentioned at all because many teachers were ambivalent about the role of parents in their children's homework, and believed that what children did at home ought to be consolidation of classroom work, capable of being undertaken by the child himself or herself.

Differences among secondary teachers as to the purposes of homework were not as marked as in the primary sector, and differences among teachers according to subject specialisation did not show much variation either.

2) *Pupils*

Asked to complete the sentence "I think teachers give us homework because ..." what pupils most commonly described was reinforcement of classroom learning

> *"to make us learn and understand things and retain more knowledge"*
> *(primary 5 girl)*

There is a tendency for this purpose to be mentioned more and more frequently as children progress through the system. By contrast, the next most commonly cited reason "helps you to learn more", received less and less emphasis, as did the related item "helps you get a good education". In other words, the older the pupil the less emphasis put on broader, perhaps more philosophical aims.

"Teachers give us homework because ..."

(% of pupil responses)

n = 1120	primary	S1/2	S3/4	S4/5
reinforcement	33	33	36	53
helps you learn more	30	27	15	8
to finish unfinished work	12	17	26	24
helps you get a good education	7	5	5	2
helps independent work	6	5	3	2
preparation for next lesson	5	4	2	1
as a punishment	3	3	4	0
see if we understand	2	5	8	10
lets parents see work	1	1	1	0
other	1	1	1	1

This table may of course, tell us more about how pupils perceive their teachers' intentions, than what they themselves think. Their perceptions do, in some respects (for example, reinforcement) reflect closely what their teachers say but in other respects they differ quite substantially. What is missing from this table is any reference to home school links, whereas finishing unfinished work is more likely to be mentioned by pupils than their teachers. It is interesting too that diagnostic purposes of homework are more likely to be cited by pupils than their teachers.

In talking about purposes pupils are more likely to describe what they actually experience rather than the underlying intentions. A comparison of individual school again revealed some sharp differences. In Maplegrove Academy, for example, finishing unfinished work was a common practice, whereas in Greylands it was frowned upon.

"Teachers give us homework because ..."

(% of pupils responses by school)

n = 366	Meadowpark Primary	Newstreets Primary	Maplegrove Academy	Greylands High
reinforcement	42	12	57	23
helps you learn more	23	70	10	40
finish unfinished work	8	4	34	4
other	27	14	0	33

Differences from one school to the next reflect a number of things - how explicitly and in what terms teachers talk to pupils about the purposes of homework, in what way parents justify the need to do homework, and what pupils' actual experience tells them. The younger the child, the more likely it is that he or she will make sense of personal experience in terms of how adults explain it. As pupils progress through the system, however, their own cumulative experience is liable to become the more telling factor. So review and reinforcement receive greatest emphasis in upper secondary as the nature of homework becomes progressively more focused on examinations. By the same token there may be decreasing likelihood for young people to see homework as developing study habits or skills for independent work.

> *"All that stuff about skills for independent learning is a nice romantic idea but I can assure you that it's not what actually happens." (6th year boy)*

It might have been expected that the more mature they became the more pupils would see the benefits of study as more far-reaching than the immediate goal of exams. Since this does not appear to be the case it may point to a progressive narrowing of the focus of learning and a progressively instrumental view of what learning is for. While this does not necessarily imply that skills for independent learning remain undeveloped, it does suggest that pupils have less awareness of these than they might, and are therefore in a weak position to manage and to change their approach to study.

Talking to pupils specifically about what they did the night before, or during that week, there were clear differences in the meaning given to that work by pupils, varying from school to school and teacher to teacher. While some pupils found it hard to talk about their work in any other terms than getting it done or pleasing the teacher, others did see homework as serving useful purposes and as having concrete personal benefit. This was related to the nature of the work itself and the care taken by teachers to help the pupil understand, and take ownership of that work.

It was suggested by some teachers that if pupils didn't share a grander view of homework, it was because as teachers they hadn't thought hard enough about how they planned and allocated homework and didn't spend enough time in open discussion with pupils about purposes and patterns of home and school learning.

"Teachers give us homework because ..."

Primary

> *"It helps us to learn how to do work"*
>
> *"She wants to see if we can cope on our own and not in a group."*
>
> *"They want us to stimulate the brain."*

Secondary

> *"Some homework is good. It keeps your brain ticking over."*
>
> *"It helps to improve our learning skills."*
>
> *"It helps to apply and practice the theory we have been learning in class."*
>
> *"We need to do more at home because they don't teach us good."*
>
> *"It's their job and if they don't they might be told they are not doing their job properly and be transferred to another school."*
>
> *"They're so naive they think it helps"*
>
> *"Some teachers enjoy it because they know it bugs you."*

3) *Parents*

Parents' views reflect those of teachers at least as far as reinforcement is concerned.

> *"It's to help them remember it, so they can understand it and it stays in better."*

Unlike teachers, however, parents frequently mentioned specific skills or subjects.

"The most useful kind of homework for my child ..."

% of parents' responses (including multiple responses)
n = 710

	primary	secondary
Reading	22	3
Mathematics	14	18
Spelling	7	1
Writing	6	6
English	6	15
Reinforcement/consolidation	12	24
Practice with weaknesses/difficulties	6	6
Using reference books	4	4
Something enjoyable	4	2
Other	19	21

The relatively high emphasis given to reading and mathematics stems in part from a concern for "basic skills" but is also a reflection of prevalent practice. In other words in many instances reading, spelling and mathematics are the only form of homework that parents see. One in five parents mentioned a purpose for homework which did not fall into any of the categories on the above table, and are repreesnted by *other*. These included *general knowledge, broadening their outlook, something practical, establishing good study habits, improving communication, developing critical thinking, increasing family interaction.*

In response to the questions "the most useful kind of homework for me", there was an even wider range of functions. These included *homework which keeps me in touch, anything I can help with, projects, anything of benefit to my child, things which promote family discussion, practice in weaknesses, research, encouraging out of school interests, listening and encouraging discipline.* Again specific skills and subjects were cited with mathematics and reading or English mentioned equally by 12% of primary and secondary parents.

"The most useful kind of homework for me ..."

"Work which inspires discussion and thought between parent and child"

"The time spent with my child discussing her school day and trying to resolve any difficulties which may have arisen"

"I feel that it is essential that I know what she is doing at school, that I show an interest in her development and ability. I also feel strongly that too many children now are forced to become independent too early principally because their parents lack the time to share with them."

"Help with the new education system"

"That which lets me see her weaknesses"

The most common response was *homework which keeps me in touch* mentioned by 16% of primary and 8% of secondary parents. However, in the interview situation virtually all parents stressed the importance for them of homework as a vehicle for keeping in touch with the school and keeping in touch with their child. One way in which this expressed itself was through homework which promoted family discussion:

> *"We really enjoy it when he's doing something we can all discuss and sometimes we have really heated arguments about things like food, the Third World, advertising, the police, television, drugs, alcohol."*

In schools where there was a high level of parent participation (in classes or through parent workshops, for example) parents were more likely to share the schools' views of homework. In schools where there was little parental involvement or comparatively little information and explanation for parents, they would have recourse to their own experience of school, their own assumptions, or what their children told them.

> *"How would I know? It's the school that gives the homework. I suppose for the same reasons I got it when I was lad, whatever that was."*

Explaining the purposes

In the 1989 national survey of parents views 65% said that the school had never explained its homework policies to them.[3] The schools surveyed in this study appeared to have a better record, nonetheless nearly half of parents agreed that the school could do more to explain the purposes of homework.

"School could do more to explain the purpose of homework"

n = 610	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
% of parents	14	34	44	9

Secondary parents were more likely to agree with this statement than primary parents, but the primary/secondary differences were not always sharply defined. Indeed there tended to be greater differences from one school to another.

"School could do more to explain the purpose of homework"

n = 154 (% of parents)	strongly agree/agree	disagree/strongly disagree
Northeastern Primary	33	66
Eastforth Primary	22	78
Greylands High	30	70
Maplegrove Academy	54	46

While these figures are not of themselves 'proof' of schools differential success in informing parents, it was clear from interviews with staff and parents that the positive steps taken in Forth and Greylands to keep parents in touch were, in fact, paying off.

In all 13 schools there was a very high level of agreement among teachers that more could be done to inform parents.

"Parents should be given more information"

n = 200

(% of teachers)	strongly agree/agree	disagree/strongly disagree
primary	86	15
secondary	89	11

In one or two schools the headteacher had a carefully thought through and strong view of homework but had not succeeded in communicating this to parents, largely because he or she had not succeeded in convincing teaching staff. For example, one secondary head saw the most salient benefits of homework in terms of social and life skills such as self-direction and time management, yet individual members of staff were sceptical of that perspective, or paid lip service to it, without ever translating that principle into practice or without ever communicating it to parents or to pupils.

> *"As a heidie you can believe as passionately as you like about something but you've first got to carry your staff, and then you rely on them to carry the parents. There is no point in having glossy policies and then teachers going their own sweet way."*

In other words, it was clearly not sufficient in itself that a headteacher, or a senior management team, had a well-articulated view of homework, or even that these views found an echo in school policies. Nor even was it sufficient that these views were reflected in what teachers themselves said. It had also to be seen in what they actually did and what was actually communicated to pupils and parents through the nature of the homework engaged in, and the day-to-day management of homework by the classroom teacher.

In summary

Reinforcement or review of classroom learning tends to be seen by teachers, pupils, and parents as the main aim of homework.

There is, however, a wide range of different views among parents, teachers and individual schools.

It is important for pupils, parents, and teachers that different assumptions about homework are discussed and clarified.

Pupils can be helped to see the purpose of the work they do at home, but this is only likely to be useful where the quality of work clearly embodies that purpose.

Parents play an important role in helping their children understand the purpose of their work but can only do that when the school communicates its policy and engages parents in a dialogue about the relationship between school and home learning.

Chapter 4

Is homework worthwhile?

A common assumption among those who write about homework is that parents are enthusiastic, teachers ambivalent, and pupils hostile. This study provides no support for such a set of stereotypes, indeed it suggests that all three groups share broadly similar views. Parents and teachers gave a remarkably similar response to the statement "most homework is a waste of time".

"Most homework is a waste of time"

(% of responses)

n = 808	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
teachers	0	2	53	44
parents	1	2	41	55

Pupils' judgements about the enjoyability and value of homework gave a more equivocal, but nonetheless positive response.

The value of homework

(% of pupils)

n = 1011

	always	usually	sometimes	never
Primary				
"I enjoy homework"	11	21	42	26
"I learn a lot from homework"	23	30	39	8
Secondary				
"I enjoy homework"	1	16	52	30
"I learn a lot from homework"	8	31	48	13

This pupil view suggests, with a strong sense of realism, that homework is not always, or even usually enjoyable and beneficial, but that it sometimes is, and that this depends on the quality of what is prescribed.

For some pupils homework is unacceptable on principle.

> *"I think homework is an excessive amount of work that is unnecessary. After working hard at school you shouldn't be pressured into doing more school work after school, because this could lead to vital stress"*

> *"When you get home from school you start school all over again. You might as well just have stayed at school."*

If school learning is not a motivating or pleasant experience it is not too difficult to understand an equal antipathy to homework. However, some of those who wrote most eloquently against having to do homework, also made the following kind of statement.

> *"Sometimes I do three or four hours at the weekend if it's something I really get interested in. Sometimes when it's raining I'm glad I've got homework, because there's nothing else to do."*

Opposition (even the most hardened opposition) to homework tended to be selective, a dislike of certain kinds of homework, or it had to do with problems about the time and context in which homework had to be completed, or confusion over how it had been presented in the classroom.

> *"Some teachers give homework without any relevant reason and it's no use and no help. I think homework is worthwhile but should be apt to reinforce points that maybe I'm not sure about."*

The following two tables present a summary of pupil responses to the open-ended questions "The best thing about homework is ..." and "The worst thing about homework is ...".

"The best thing about homework is ..."

(% of responses)

n = 1212	Primary	S1/S2	S3/S4	S5/S6
A particular subject (eg art, current affairs)	24	5	6	0
Helps you understand/learn	17	25	37	56
Finishing it	16	18	12	12
When you don't get much/any	9	10	7	1
When you can do it	7	3	1	7
Can be interesting/fun	6	10	6	3
Keeps you occupied	6	9	3	0
Helps you catch up/practice skills	4	3	5	10
Nothing	4	5	13	0
Gives excuse for not doing chores etc	2	3	1	2
Helps parents help you	1	3	0	0
Other	4	6	9	9

One of the most encouraging aspects of this table is the trend for homework to be seen progressively as helpful, as useful for catching up on work and for practising skills. While younger pupils often criticised homework for being simply a repetition of what they had done in class, senior pupils were more likely to say that whay they did at home had a close and positive relationship with what they did in school, or that homework brought insight and understanding of the subject matter.

> *"You work away at something, then suddenly you see it like a flash. You often don't get the chance to do that kind of work in the class. So it's actually more useful than class lessons."*

Others who spoke about homework being more useful than class work said that this was because you didn't get interrupted by the teacher, who wanted to address the class or deal with problems that were not your problems.

The greatest drawback of homework was seen by pupils as its incursion into leisure time.

"The worst thing about homework is ..."

(% of pupil responses)
n = 1128

	Primary	S1/S2	S3/S4	S5/S6
Stops you doing other things	20	22	17	20
Having to do it	17	22	13	11
Too much/takes too much time	15	25	35	42
Boring	5	8	11	11
I don't understand/Too hard	4	13	11	6
Learning facts by heart	2	1	2	2
Badly timetabled	1	5	8	5
Specific subjects				
English (eg words, sentences etc)	11	1	0	0
Maths (eg tables, sums)	10	0	0	0
Too much writing	8	1	2	0
Other	7	3	2	3

The most worrying statistic here is the increase between primary 7 and secondary 1 in the percentage of pupils saying they found difficulty with homework. It would appear to reinforce the point that primary-secondary transition requires more careful co-ordination.

What then, from a pupil point of view, would help to make homework better?

"I would find homework easier to do if ..."

(% of responses)
n = 1120

	Primary	S1/S2	S3/S4	S5/S6
	%	%	%	%
It were better explained	17	18	24	21
There was less homework	18	18	16	13
It were more interesting	9	5	8	8
It were optional/could choose type	9	3	1	1
There was more time to do it	4	7	10	9
There was someone to help	4	9	7	3
There was better timetabling	2	4	9	17
I could concentrate better	2	12	5	8
There were guidelines how	0	4	4	3
Other	25	20	16	17

One of the strongest recurring themes in this study is the plea to teachers to be more careful in their assigning and explaining of homework.

> *"They just say finish that off or do page such and such and you don't care much at the time because you just want to get out but later on when you get home you realise you don't understand what you have to do or how to do it."*

This was related to the second most common complaint which was about quantity.

> *"When you have too much you just get so demoralised"*

The request was not always just for less but for a less daunting task.

> *"If we didn't get long, long things like essays and then when you've done that you get 25 questions."*
>
> *"I find it very hard when we have 4 or 5 subjects in one night to switch your thinking"*

Better timetabling is mentioned by pupils in secondary schools, particularly in senior classes, as an issue. This was related to them not being given enough time, or notice, for completion. Heavy and light homework evenings tended to follow timetable patterns, so for example, if pupils had a 'heavy day' comprised of subjects which all gave homework, they could end up on one evening with excessive homework. This was to some extent solved by giving 3 or more days notice of homework, but distribution of subjects could still cause a problem, for example, if heavy homework subjects tended to fall say on a Wednesday and Thursday.

"I would find homework easier to do if ..."

"It was given as short exercises quite often as opposed to big ones where we are given a lot of time to do it."

"I could borrow books from the library."

"Teacher would explain how to do it and not just slap it down in front of us."

"It wasn't just writing and writing but getting to know all the things it is all about."

"I could invite some of my friends round to my house and do it together."

"I didn't get an abundance at one time."

"I got some ones in a whiel."

Taking time over homework

If homework is simply a ritual exercise it will be something to be got out of the way as quickly as possible. If it is meaningful, on the other hand it is more likely to be something that you take time and thought over. The following tables offer some evidence on the extent to which pupils see their homework as meaningful or worthwhile.

"I just do homework to get it over with as quickly as possible"

% of pupils **n = 1005**	always/usually	sometimes	never
primary	38	38	25
S1/2	42	38	21
S3/4	37	48	15
S5/6	22	52	26

"I take time over homework and think about what I'm doing"

% of pupils n = 1003	always/usually	sometimes	never
primary	61	31	7
S1/2	55	39	5
S3/4	61	33	6
S5/6	77	21	2

The principal conclusion that can be drawn from these tables is that for the majority of pupils there are times when they think about their homework and take it seriously but that there are also times when homework is something to be got over with as quickly as possible. If this may be interpreted as a measure of whether pupils take responsibility for their own learning it is reassuring that young people are more likely to do this as they move towards upper secondary. By the same token it may be seen as disappointing that only half of primary pupils say that they *always* or *usually* take time and thought over homework.

An even stiffer test of value and ownership was whether pupils voluntarily did more homework than they had to.

"I do more homework than I have to because I'm interested in it"

(% of pupils) n = 1003	always/usually	sometimes	never
primary	9	42	49
secondary	11	57	32

There are greater differences from school to school than by school stage. For example, there was a range of 21% (Greylands High) to 44% (Northcity High) saying they *never* did extra voluntary homework.

There are some differences between boys and girls in relation to all three of the above questions. 24% of boys say they always got it over with as quickly as possible as compared with 14% of girls. 66% of girls said they always or usually took time over homework as compared with 57% of boys. 54% of boys said they never did more than they had to simply out of interest, as compared with 44% of girls. In other words, there would appear to be a consistent trend for girls as a group to take more responsibility for their own learning - a statistic which tended to coincide with teachers' judgements.

Pupils frequently suggested that parental and teacher expectations were one of the most decisive factors in making them do their homework irrespective of the intrinsic qualities of the work prescribed. This reservoir of pupil goodwill and a desire to please teachers existed at all levels in primary and secondary school

> *"We all do it because she's so nice and she is so pleased when we all bring in good work." (primary 5 girl)*
>
> *"I like pleasing the teacher. I really like it when she says 'Well done. That was a good piece of work.' It makes it all worthwhile." (S2 boy)*

> *"You don't like to let her down. In a sense you are doing it for her but you're really doing it for yourself because you want her to approve of you and think you're good." (S5 boy)*

Individual differences

Among other factors determining pupils' approach were their own motivation, mood, well-being, weather, family circumstances, the quality and quantity of homework assigned and its relevance for that individual pupil. Pupils resented work above or below their level of ability, and criticised teachers who catered to the lowest common denominator of ability or pitched their homework to some notional middle ground. In the view of pupils good teachers individualised homework. Teachers, in fact, tended to agree.

"Amount of homework should vary"

(% of teachers)

n = 203	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
primary	35	54	9	2
secondary	27	55	16	2

"Type of homework should vary"

(% of teachers)
n = 203

	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
primary	28	70	2	0
secondary	36	59	5	1

There is not much disagreement here between primary and secondary teachers, with only a minority believing that the amount of homework should be the same for all, and an even smaller minority believing that the type of homework should not differ. Differences among secondary schools tended to be larger than between primaries and secondaries.

The arguments against individualising homework were that it was impracticable and time consuming for the teacher.

> *"It boils down to this. You don't have the time to set it and you don't have the time to mark or go over 30 different pieces of work."*

However, this was not a problem where class work was already individualised. Primary reading schemes are differentiated and many schools use an individualised spelling scheme in which pupils keep their own record of spelling words related to their reading. Homework in these schools is simply an extension of class work with reading and spelling an integral, rather than a separate aspect. Another example is secondary Kent maths in which tasks are individualised and what pupils do at home is simply a continuation or consolidation of their work in school. The same is often true in a range of subjects across the curriculum.

The following is one example of an English departmental policy:

> *"Every pupil has been issued with a Reading Record in which they have to record material they read privately. They also have a Target Sheet which encourages them to set themselves a number of pages to read each week in their own time. The teacher may also at times set a number of pages to be read. This allows every pupil to work at their own pace, from S1 to S6. Parents can support their child in this area by discussing books read and encouraging them to set aside time for reading."*

The clearest example of the value and relevance of individualised homework is illustrated by the approach to pupils with specific learning difficulties, who often make dramatic progress as a result of teachers' looking carefully at their needs. That same principle is applicable across the curriculum, and where that happens homework is manifestly worthwhile.

In summary

Parents and teachers share a common belief in the value of homework.

Pupils are most likely to value homework when:

- it is well explained
- they are given advance notice and have adequate time to do it
- it is interesting or varied
- it is at their level of ability

Parent and teachers expectations carry great weight in motivating pupils to do homework, but this is most likely to be effective in a situation where the school monitors homework and provides support to pupils with learning or social difficulties.

Chapter 5

What is the nature of homework?

> *"At the centre of the curriculum running across all subjects is the central purpose of helping young people to manage their learning. This means helping them to develop attitudes and skills which are an integral aspect of their personal and social development. So, working in the school, working at home are simply facets of the same thing. It is a seamless cloth." (secondary head)*

Homework, in the view of many primary and secondary heads, ought to be an integral part of learning rather than something compartmentalised and separate. Seeing it this way also means seeing it as an integral part of a certain kind of learning - learning which is relevant, exploratory, and where teachers and pupils share enthusiasm for what they are about.

> *"When learning has that character it is the most natural thing in the world for children to pursue their own reading, their own inventing, their own excitement in finding out and getting better and better."*

But what happens at different stages in the primary and secondary school?

The early years

Homework quite typically begins in the early weeks of primary 1 when children get their first book or word tin to take home. The word tin normally contains three or four words which provide the first building blocks of word recognition and reading. Sometimes words are accompanied by component letters which the child can use to build the word. The parent was generally seen as having an integral role to play in this. However, some parents were a bit in the dark as to what to do with the word tin and why it contained the words it did. It was felt by some primary teachers that there ought to be some clear rationale for the selection of words and that this rationale ought to be made obvious to parents. For example, in some schools it was seen as vital to include words which could be used to build sentences and construct meanings, allowing more scope for children to play with ideas rather than simply recognise combinations of letters.

Following the word tin many children take home their first reading book, often reinforcing the vocabulary contained in the word tin. Homework often consists of three or four pages of reading from the reading book. Not all parents, or teachers, were happy with the school's approach to reading, however. On the one hand concern was expressed that it was too easy for children to fool the teacher into thinking they were actually 'reading' when they were in fact simply memorising. On the other hand there was concern that the few pages of nightly reading achieved no more than teaching children to decode letters and did nothing to stimulate and excite children about reading. This problem became apparent to some in primary 2 and 3.

> *"Sometimes his reading card says pages 7-10. He reads 7 and 8 which go from the middle of one story to the end, then on page 9 he begins a new story and reads the first two pages of it. He does the four pages and snaps the book shut and that's 'reading'."*

In some schools homework is seen as primarily for the parent, and because parents play such a critical role at this stage teachers try to meet all parents of primary 1 children before prescribing any home tasks. For example, some schools try to engage parents' interest and involvement on their first visit to the school and establish some form of 'contract' for co-operative education. Some schools hold a parents' workshop early in the year (or even before the beginning of the school term) at which the primary aims are:

- to demythologise 'teaching and learning'
- to assure, or reassure, parents of their central role as educators
- to give parents' confidence in that role
- to suggest strategies that parents can use with their children

In all of this the attitude and approach to parents has of itself to demonstrate that teachers do actually believe that parents are the most important educators, and that the teacher's job is to support parents in that endeavour.

> *"But of everything about the school what I like best is the way they treat you as human beings, as friends even, and you never feel they're talking down to you. They want your help. They want you in the school."*

In these workshops parents are encouraged to read to their children, and to establish some regular routines such as bedtime stories. In some schools a greater stress is placed on dialogue, in which the process is less about reading than talking about the story or about the pictures. Early 'reading books' for example may contain no words, but pictures designed to stimulate parent-child discussion.

This takes on added significance where parents are bilingual, or where parents' first language is not English. Through workshops or home visits, parents are encouraged to discuss words and meanings with their children in their own community language, and wherever possible in English as well. A parent who spoke little English could, nonetheless, be encouraged to work with and support their child by sharing in and discussing what he or she was doing.

Some parents described playing Word Snap, Happy Families or Word Pelmanism with their children or other games designed to teach reading word recognition in a way that was fun at the same time as promoting interaction between parent and child. Some parents said that they spent as much as an hour a night on this kind of 'homework' in primary 1 or 2.

It was felt by some teachers, however, that parents should be encouraged to see reading and other primary skills as less episodic and more embedded in ongoing dialogue with their children, around the kitchen, tidying up, discussing what they had been watching on television.

The following is one school's 'around the house advice' to parents:

- *try to think what makes your child tick and the sort of things he or she may be curious about*
- *try to talk about things that you know interests him and that he would be most likely to talk about*
- *wherever possible try to respond to your child's questions in a positive way*
- *when asking questions try to ask 'why' or 'how' questions rather than 'what' questions because they are more likely to make her think and begin to 'theorise".*
- *if your child gets it wrong it is probably for a good reason. Instead of correcting it try to discover how she is thinking about it. For instance, if she says 2 and 2 make 5 it is more helpful to find out what she was doing to get that answer than simply telling her it is 4.*

Teachers, particularly in areas of deprivation, stressed that any such advice had to be set in the real world, and not some idealised version of family life. Helping children develop mathematical skills through activities such as setting the table, baking, washing the dishes together, or discussing things at mealtimes, may not apply to a large proportion of households where such activities simply never take place. For instance, the majority of pupils interviewed in this research had their evening meal during *Neighbours* or *Home and Away*, very often on their own and sometimes before one or both parents came home from work.

There is an increasing recognition that in the education of young children the role of the teachers has to be one of dialogue and consultancy with parents, as one headteacher put it

> *"Teachers too often graciously allow parents into their classrooms and into the education of their children. How do we get through to teachers that they are being given a relatively minor but highly privileged role in the education of these children and that if they don't put parents into the educational foreground they are both usurping parents' authority and wasting their time."*

Middle and upper primary

Some parents found that in the middle years of primary their children were making less progress and that involvement with their children's work had decreased. These two things may not be unrelated. The emphasis in primary 3 onwards seems to be more on the child than the parent and usually children have a single homework task, lasting usually no more than five or ten minutes. Most commonly this consists of a few spelling words and, as pupils progress through the school, sums or tables.

While some schools place less emphasis on parental contact by this stage, others see the dangers of losing the momentum at the transition from primary 2 to 3 and make a renewed effort with parental workshops.

> *"It is important to keep mums and dads in touch with the changing nature of demands being made on them and not let them think that now that the weans are reading their job is over."*

In one school a series of workshops was held for primary 3 parents who wanted to learn how to play number games with their children. 21 out of 30 primary parents attended on a regular basis. In another school a parent of a primary 4 child described how she had been encouraged by the school to continue her involvement with her daughter's learning:

> *"They were doing things on vegetables, so I was told what I could do when we took our 8 year old to the shops. We talked about different vegetables and smells and sizes and shapes and tastes and all kinds of vegetables I didn't even know existed and where they came from and how much they cost and why they cost a lot or not much. We even tried courgettes for first time."*

The self-assessment diary used in one school was one device through which parents and teachers could systematically communicate over homework and its relationship with in-class work. One parent described how that channel of communication proved useful to her.

> *"She was having difficulty with her maths. When I talked to her it turned out it was because she was all screwed up about standing up and saying her tables the next day. I wrote this in her self-assessment diary and the next day the teacher didn't call on her but just heard her tables quietly on her own."*

In relation to the quality of homework in the middle years and upper years of primary there was progressive disenchantment with the common practice of writing out five words three times each and composing a sentence for each of these five words.

> *"I am getting a mite scunnered wi' the words. I can see they have to do them but could they not make it a wee bit mair interesting wi' puzzles or crosswords. Dress it up, you know what I mean."*

Many heads and teachers were critical of this method not only because it could become tedious, but also because it was an ineffective way of teaching spelling.

> *"Copying out or rewriting words actually does not help most bad spellers because their difficulties have to do with weak visual memory and they need help in how to relate sounds and rhythms to shapes and words. Find the reason why the pupils spelled the word that way and there is a chance you can teach him not to."*

In recognition of this, some primary heads asked teachers only to teach vocabulary words and spelling in context, when they had some particular topical relevance, or when they were part of a meaningful task. Where pupils had to write an advertisement, for example, and redraft and proof read it, it was intrinsic to the task that they should pay particular attention to spelling. In some schools spelling was never given for homework but treated systematically within classroom teaching using word banks and spelling resources.

Asking pupils themselves to come up with words and then to share them with the class was liked by many teachers, because it gave pupils more initiative and could be used as a basis for the next lesson. Pupils would, for example, be asked to find ten 'ough' words, or in the context of a reading book find as many words as possible to describe a character or place. In one school with 16 different community languages, pupils were asked to find as many words as possible for the Scots 'kelpie' or sprite. This had blossomed into a rich exploration of cultural myths and fairy stories.

When asked to describe a piece of homework that had been particularly useful or memorable, most pupils and parents described a project. Through projects parents were more able to get a real taste of what was going on in the class:

> *"They were studying the Third World and what poor people ate. She brought home a recipe for carrot cake. This wasn't your California Cookie Company, by the way. It was horrible, but it was a good way for us to start talking about poverty and suchlike."*

While investigations were popular they were also most likely to receive adverse comment from parents where they required resources that parents didn't have. This was exacerbated in remote areas where there were no libraries or bookshops. One headteacher had, after a series of parental complaints, written it in to school policy that any investigative work had to be within the resources of all parents and households.

> *"The biggest source of complaints, literally dozens of phone calls, was about homework that kids couldn't do because they couldn't find the answers or they couldn't do because they didn't have the books."*

The kind of homework commented on most positively involved research and use of initiative which required resourcefulness but not specialist, and often unattainable, resources. This is illustrated by two different approaches to the Second World War.

In one primary school pupils were asked to find out the dates of different events in the war, to look up maps and place names, to look at how different countries had changed boundaries, and to write an essay on evacuees. The approach in another school is described by a primary seven girl.

> *"We were doing the Second World War and we made a family out of old pillows and stockings and stuff and we dressed them up in 1940s clothes and we gave them names and decided how they would live, and what they would do and how they would get news of the war because they didn't have tellies, and we made up shopping lists with coupons and made up old money."*

The success of this project was helped by the involvement of parents and grandparents and culminated in an exhibition at the school during a parents' evening.

Other parents described projects in which they found themselves involved, for example, a project on dinosaurs which had led to taking their children to the dinosaur exhibition in Edinburgh, visiting a farm together for the first time, and getting the extended family involved in a project on family trees. One parent described how she had taken the initiative when her son couldn't be stirred into interest by the local area survey.

> *"We live in a Brookside-type cul de sac so I suggested he just do a wee survey of what people worked at and where they went to work. It was amazing. It got us both going."*

Parents who had children in secondary were sometimes critical of the primary school for not having given pupils more opportunities to organise their own work, feeling that they weren't adequately prepared for 'the big school'. Some headteachers and teachers were inclined to agree with this and thought that by upper primary it was important that children were taking responsibility for the organisation of their own work. So tasks for the week would be outlined on a Monday, for example, a news report, a reading assignment, work on a continuing project, and some set task, say, in mathematics.

Secondary 1 and 2

Some parents described real difficulties in the move from primary to secondary homework.

> *"In primary it was a wee bit of work every night. Nae bother. In secondary she had four or five subjects one night and nothing the next. It was given out in advance and she was expected to organise herself. She just couldn't and she got terribly anxious and upset. It was a hard time for all of us for a few months."*

Pupils were often expected to cope with this transition from the relative simplicity of primary homework to this new set of demands without any help and support.

> *"It was shock in first year. I had a lot of difficulties just because I had so many different things to do and I didn't know how to get it all together and the teachers didn't give you any help how to do it" (2nd year boy)*

The pattern of a pupil's homework assignments for a week could be the consequence of a quite random process, depending on the initiative of individual departments and individual teachers. In some schools homework was co-ordinated so as not to cause too much overlap and interference, and in some instances pupils were given advice and support in coping with it, but homework rarely seemed to be orchestrated so as to offer a breadth and balance in the quality of work pupils were undertaking.

On the other hand, the majority of pupils welcomed the variety that secondary work brought with it:

> *"In primary it was always the same thing, doing the words. It's more varied in the academy."*

Not only is there variety but a range of different approaches, styles and demands made of the learner. These subjects are also delivered by specialists who have not only a particular allegiance to that subject and an individual interpretation of that subject, but also have an individual theory of learning and an implicit theory of the relationship of home to school learning. In other words, the sequence of 12 different homework tasks that a child may be confronted with in first year, is mediated by:

- different realms of knowledge
- the way in which each teacher represents that realm of knowledge and translates it into the pupil's world of experience and understanding
- the way in which teachers set the learning of their subject (in and out of the classroom) within the social context of the child's home and sets of relationships.

What pupils also have to learn, if they have not already learned it in the primary or from their parents, is the hierarchy of value attached to each subject. They may also discover that teachers can individually regard their subject as the most significant of all but not argue that case because they acknowledge the prevailing priorities.

> *"If you've really got a lot to do, you do English and Maths and leave the Art. You know he won't jump up and down because he is making allowances for the jumping up and down by Mr X and Mrs Y (the English and Maths teacher)"*

Teachers too recognised the problem, as one teacher of Technological Studies commented:

> *"They complain because they've got 'important' homework, so you make it voluntary, and then they don't do it anyway because they're doing their 'important' homework."*

There is also the hidden curriculum of the timetable which, as well as reflecting high and low priorities, dictates and constrains the pattern of homework by the way in which it distributes different subjects across the week. There is a wide range of approaches to timetabling from the 8 period to the 2 period day. Each of these have far reaching implications for the allocation and planning of homework.

English, Maths, and Modern Languages tend to have a fairly regular place on the timetable (perhaps 3 or 4 times weekly) and pupils tend to have regular reinforcing types of homework activity, such as rehearsing and going over what has been taught in class and finishing off classwork. Modern Languages usually requires the learning of vocabulary words, or phrases, and parents are quite likely to play a part in quizzing vocabulary. English and Modern Languages also use homework as preparation, for example, preparing a talk to be given in class, or rehearsing a role play.

Social subjects homework tends to be once or twice weekly activity, often revising classwork, sometimes carrying out some practical investigation such as keeping a weather record in geography or gathering material for model making in history.

Science also tends to be once or twice weekly and typically doesn't give much homework, but it is likely to be more in the nature of finding the applications of science in a home environment - chemistry in the kitchen and biology in the street and garden.

There is a cluster subjects which also occur once weekly and which often gave no homework at all in first and second year - Art and Design, Music, Home Economics, Computing Studies, Drama, Physical Education, Religious Education and Technological Studies. Sometimes this is in deference to other subjects which take up a great deal of time, sometimes simply a historical legacy, or the department hadn't given careful consideration to the place of homework in that subject.

In some schools there was homework in all subjects, for example:

- In Art pupils kept a sketch book, noted ways in which art and design played an important part in the environment, and noted relevant current news items

- In Technological Studies pupils did design work with practical benefits, for example, designing and making book covers

- In Drama pupils wrote and rehearsed parts for plays or role plays

- In PE children rehearsed dance steps at home.

Secondary 3 and 4

In third and fourth year the varied pattern of homework requirements by different subjects is a continuing theme. While most subjects now give homework, some require a regular three or four times weekly commitment while others set assignments once every two or three weeks. A once fortnightly ink exercise (a neatly presented write-up of an experiment, for example) is a quite regular feature in some subjects, particularly in science. For pupils, keeping track of different subject requirements and organising time accordingly, was becoming increasingly complex.

Some subjects distributed a large quantity of information sheets and worksheets which pupil had to keep and organise in some systematic fashion. One guidance teacher had counted over 600 sheets issued to pupils in fourth year.

> *"It is worrying that we don't actually offer much help and guidance to kids on how to manage all this. This is what used to happen to us at university and plenty of us didn't cope with it too well."*

It was widely felt that Standard Grade had brought with it quite radical changes in the nature of homework tasks prescribed and in the demands it made of pupils. Much of this required independent research. For example:

- The Modern Studies project required that pupils did some independent work using public opinion surveys, library research, interviewing, and letter writing.

- In Standard Grade Art and Design pupils were given a design brief (for example incorporating Indo/Pakistani motifs) and then had to do background research such as visiting shopping centres, making sketches, watching TV programmes of how designers work.

- In Home Economics pupils investigated pricing and marketing policies visiting different retail outlets and comparing prices and customer segments of the market for particular domestic goods.

- In Social and Vocational Skills pupils worked at home and in school making goods and planning how these would be marketed and sold.

One of the effects of this was to bring parents back into touch with what their children were doing, often because young people required help or advice, or needed to use the their parents as resources - for interviewing, getting family contacts, buying newspapers, watching or taping certain TV programmes. This was commented on favourably by some parents:

> *"It's more like an education they're getting now instead of just swotting up facts to pass an exam."*

Teachers also commented positively on pupils who might, in the past, have been written off as far as homework was concerned, but who could now be expected to do work on their own outside school because they saw its importance for them. For example, pupils following TVEI and Social and Vocational Skills courses frequently said that they had changed their attitude to homework.

> *"I hadn't done any homework for about three year, but I don't mind this because it's teaching me something that's going to be useful to me, ken"*

One parent commented

> *"In TVEI they don't see it as homework. They do it as a natural extension of what they are doing in school. It isn't a chore to be dreaded."*

Secondary 5/6

By secondary five and six homework tends to be focused on Higher exams and on passing those exams. Schools differ, however, in how they prepare pupils. At one extreme pupils may be given responsibility for their own study and allocated little or no specific homework. At the other extreme teachers may carry the responsibility on behalf of their pupils and allocate relevant and graded work over the period leading to the exams.

Some schools drop any requirement for parental oversight while some still require evidence of a parental signature. In some schools there are no sanctions for pupils who fail to do the work, in others pupils may be required to submit work.

In many subjects the investigative, creative aspect of homework has disappeared and been replaced by homework which is primarily consolidation and revision. Homework in fifth and sixth year typically takes the form of reading handouts, redrafting class notes, writing notes from textbooks, writing essays, doing interpretations and translations, writing up laboratory work, designing computer programmes, putting together a folio or project, completing sample answers from past papers which teachers then go over individually or as a part of class work. In all of this teachers usually try to provide a model of how to tackle learning for exams and discourage pupils from meaningless memorisation or aimless and unfocused reading.

Some schools which had conducted their own monitoring and evaluation of homework in S5/6 had been disturbed by the inefficiency of pupils' approach to their study, both in terms of their ability to organise their work, and in their ability to structure and reconceptualise what they were reading. Typically pupils spent a great deal of time rewriting what was in their textbooks, then rewriting and further rewriting their notes.

While this pointed clearly towards a need for more direct teaching of how to study it was generally acknowledged by teachers that this was an issue left far too late in pupils' academic life.

> *"Higher results are made in S1 and 2. Attitudes to work and habits of work have to be developed from the start and it should be a prime purpose for every teacher."*

In summary

In early primary, parents play a key role in educating, and supporting the school education of their children. As pupils progress through school the onus for homework shifts from the parent to the child.

Homework which encouraged investigation and personal initiative was welcomed by pupils and parents. These were likely to be most beneficial where teachers were clear about purposes, resources, and ways in which development of basic skills could be made an integral part.

The transition from primary to secondary can create serious problems. There is an obvious need for secondary schools and their feeder primaries to coordinate approaches to homework.

In upper secondary pupils are often expected to take responsibility for their own learning out of school, but this is likely to be effective only where it has been seen throughout school life as an intrinsic part of pupils' personal and academic development.

One of the most influential factors on the planning and distribution of homework in secondary schools is the timetable. In timetable planning this needs to be considered as an important influencing factor.

Chapter 6

How long do pupils spend on homework?

A consistent finding of research studies is that time spent on homework varies widely. A survey conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research compared 9 year olds in England, Wales and Northern Ireland on maths homework and found that in England 71% had no homework while in Wales it was 48% and in Northern Ireland 3%. 3 In Scotland a national study in 1989 reported 17% of primary school parents saying that their children never had any homework. It also found considerable variation from school to school, teacher to teacher, and from pupil to pupil within the same class.

In this study pupils were asked a number of questions about the time they spent on homework, including how much they did the night before and how much they thought they did on a typical night. In addition they kept a diary recording how much they actually did each night during one week, and in interviews they were asked to describe what and how much they had done the previous evening. These various sources suggests that the following pupil and parent estimates of a typical evening's work are quite accurate.

"Amount of homework on a typical evening"

(% of pupils and parents)
n = 1529

	Primary		Secondary	
	pupils	parents	pupils	parents
none	2	5	9	5
less than an hour	96	91	41	43
1-2 hours	2	4	47	43
2-3 hours	0	0	2	9
more than 3 hours	0	0	0	1

There are, however, differences from one primary to another and one secondary to another. A comparison of four schools illustrates these.

"Amount of homework on a typical evening"

(% of pupils in given schools)
n = 341

	Beinn Fraoch Primary	Newstreets Primary	Inverisles Secondary	Maplegrove Academy
none	0	21	0	17
less than 1 hour	79	70	29	62
1 - 2 hours	18	6	71	21
2 - 3 hours	3	3	0	0
more than 3 hours	0	0	0	0

(Parents' views in these four schools were very close to pupils' estimates.)

The most striking feature of this table is that Grove Academy shares more similarities with Northeastern Primary than it does with Inverisles Secondary. While this might not be regarded as necessarily problematic since different schools have different philosophies, it would undoubtedly present difficulties if the two primary schools were associated with either of the two secondaries. In Inverisles Secondary, which took children from a dozen different primaries with a range of different approaches to homework, there were in fact transitional difficulties for some pupils and their families.

Patterns in Primary

An examination of diaries of primary 5, 6 and 7 pupils reveals three types of homework activity - reading/English, mathematics and project. Taking as an arbitrary segment what all primary 5-7 pupils did on a Tuesday night there were some quite consistent patterns.

About 80% of all pupils did some form of reading or English. About 30% did mathematics or sums, and about 25% worked on a project. 8% did no homework at all and about 60% did work in more than one of the three areas. Most pupils at primary 5, 6 and 7 spent between 5 and 15 minutes on their English, reading or mathematics, while those working on a project tended to spend twenty minutes to half an hour. There was not much difference between the amount of time spent by primary 5, 6 or 7 children, but at each stage a small minority (less than 5%) fell outside the norms. Three pupils wrote that they spent up to 3 hours working on a project.

Secondary

Taking the same arbitrary Tuesday segment from pupils' diaries, the following picture of homework emerges.

Subjects studied on a given evening

(% of pupils doing homework in that subject)
n = 312

	S1/2	S3/4	S5/6
English	20	23	30
Mathematics	15	23	44
French	20	15	4
History	9	2	4
Modern Studies	9	0	2
Art	4	8	2
Computing	4	4	8
Chemistry	3	12	12
Physics	2	5	6
Geography	1	2	10
Accounting	1	7	9
Biology	0	11	4
Economics	0	1	14
German	0	4	2
Technological	0	0	2

On the evidence of their diaries, pupils typically had 1 or 2 subjects per evening at all levels of secondary. This is confirmed by pupils' responses to the question "How many subjects do you have on a typical night?".

Number of different subjects on a typical night

(% of pupils)
n = 582

	1	2	*3*	*4*	*more than 4*
S1/2	49	41	4	2	3
S3/4	39	39	17	3	3
S5/6	39	43	14	3	0

How long do pupils spend on each subject? Time spent on mathematics gives a quite representative picture.

Amount of time spent on Mathematics homework

(% of pupils who did Maths homework)
n = 205

	up to 15 mins	16-30 mins	31-60 mins	1-2 hours	2-3 hours
S1/2	17	58	17	8	0
S3/4	22	40	30	8	0
S5/6	36	33	14	14	3

Time spent on homework in each subject shows a considerable range at every year level. At one extreme a pupil could be spending 5 to 10 minutes on only one subject, at the other extreme an hour or more on each of three or four subjects. Interviews with pupils confirmed this. Some, even in upper secondary, were able to get their homework over with in 10 minutes, while others spent up to 3 or more hours on a regular basis. Although the table suggests a progression in time on homework as pupils move up through the school, that progression is not as marked as might have been expected.

These differences have to be put down to a wide range of different things and are only in part a consequence of school, or individual teacher factors. There are some pupils who cope with homework easily and quickly while others struggle and take a lot of time. Some pupils take a casual and cursory attitude to homework while others work conscientiously and carefully. Some pupils are unaware that they actually do have homework while some forget they have homework or simply decide not to do it. Some are consistently able to finish off homework within school or class time and some do very little in school. Some have only intermittent attendance through illness or truancy.

There were pupils for whom homework was problematic because they had jobs, worked after school in the family business, looked after the family because of chronic illness, or had parents who were working unsocial hours. Some children did not live with their parents, or were in surroundings hostile to homework.

All of these factors make it difficult, if not impossible, to regularise or equalise the amount of time children spend on their homework. Moreover, it is argued by many headteachers and teachers that it isn't educationally desirable or in the interest of individual pupils to try to impose a set of common parameters. However, it is clear from this evidence that there are many initiatives schools could take at the level of school policy or at the level of the individual classroom teacher, which would make homework much more manageable, and motivating for, young people.

There are clear examples of inconsistencies and disparities which arise from a lack of any whole school initiative. For example, in one school pupils get homework in primaries 1 to 4 and none in primaries 5 to 7, and in another all classes get homework except primary 6. One second year pupil who did two hours of history a week, compared with his sister in the same year who got none, explained:

> *"Well you see, I'm in 2B and that means I get Ms Smith who gives a lot of homework and she's in 2A, and Mr Brown never gives any."*

Another important factor is the amount of notice pupils get for homework. The following table shows clear primary/secondary differences among the schools in this study.

How much notice of homework do pupils get?

(% of teachers)
n = 201

	on the day	up to 3 days before	more than 3 days before	a week or more before
primary	86	14	0	0
secondary	16	14	31	23

Too much homework?

In interviews with parents they were more likely to complain of too little than too much homework, usually directed at secondary school and usually with reference to S1/2

> *"I just cannae believe it. I check him every night in life and every night it's the same story. No homework. This is a boy who did nearly an hour every night in the primary and loved his work, by the way."*

However, half of all parents with children in secondary schools had at times encountered problems with too much homework.

"My child gets too much homework to cope with"

% of parents
n = 609

	very often	often	sometimes	never
primary	0	1	13	86
secondary	1	5	41	53

This was mainly a secondary school issue and often a result of uneven distribution of work across the week. It was at times a result of bad management by the pupil himself or herself, and sometimes a consequence of bad management on the part of the school.

In secondary schools, even in schools with positive homework policies, pupils and their parents often complained about teachers' failure to see beyond their own subject.

> *"I don't think the subject teacher realises that other subjects are giving as much homework. I think teachers take it too personally. They want pupils to excel in their subject and don't take the pupils themselves into consideration. The pressure is on for that particular subject to do well, and they just put the pressure on to the pupils."*

Managing homework - whose responsibility?

There are two different kinds of strategy for dealing with the problem of too much or uneven amounts of homework. One school's solution to this is to have specified homework nights for each subject and to make sure these are known to all staff, pupils and parents:

	Monday	*Tuesday*	*Wednesday*	*Thursday*	*Friday*
2T	Science English History	French Maths	English Option Geography Home Economics	Science Modern Studies	Maths (set Thurs) French (set Thurs) Technical Art

A second approach was to regard this as a management issue for pupils rather than for the school to solve, and to help pupils to develop skills to cope with it successfully. It was these coping strategies that might, at the end of the day, prove the most valuable asset to young people.

In summary

There is an overall progression in time spent on homework from early primary to upper secondary, but this general pattern shows considerable variation from school to school, class to class, and teacher to teacher.

In primary schools it would appear to be a relatively simple management problem to ensure continuity and co-ordination of homework demands throughout the school.

In secondary schools there are times when pupils have too much homework to cope with, often as a result of subject timetabling, and often because pupils have not been given direct help in coping with the demands made of them.

It is unreasonable to expect pupils themselves to resolve the problems caused by timetabling or lack of inter-departmental consultation. Two approaches to dealing with this are

1) to timetable homework allocation
2) to give adequate notice of homework and provide systematic guidance and support for pupils in coping with it.

Chapter 7

What is the homework environment?

When do young people do their homework, where do they do it, and what kinds of physical conditions do they find most conducive, or indeed do they have any choice over the context in which they work at home?

Some young people prefer to work in their own bedroom, at their own desk, lying on the bed, sitting or lying on the floor. Others prefer to have other people around, and do their work in the kitchen or sitting room.

> *"I have a desk in my room but I prefer to work downstairs with my mum in the kitchen. I like the company"*

It was sometimes easier and more motivating to work alongside someone else in the family doing homework, especially older brothers or sisters.

> *"I like to do my homework at the same time as my big brother, or when my dad is working on something."*

Homework could be a family event:

> *"If they've got a problem they like to be in the heart of the family where everyone can put in their tuppence worth."*

Sometimes homework was a joint activity with parents or brothers or sisters, or with a friend. The following confirms the diminishing involvement of parents as children get older, and also suggests that young people are progressively more likely to get help from peers outside the family.

"Doing homework together with somebody"

(% of pupils saying 'never')

n = 995	primary	S1/2	S3/4	S5/6
mother/father	23	33	45	60
friend(s)	69	48	35	38
brother(s)/sister(s)	69	63	70	74
copying someone else's homework	93	85	64	61

Both questionnaire and interview evidence suggests that doing homework with a friend is viewed by young people, especially in primary, as very unlikely (only 3% of primary pupils say they work with a friend *very often* or *quite often*). While pupils often phone one another to clarify the task or to check answers, there did not appear to be much of a tradition of shared working. While it is not always easy for small groups to arrange to meet after school, opportunities to do collaborative work were often not exploited. This might seem surprising given the growing encouragement of group work and co-operative learning in both primary and secondary. If it is not surprising this may be because of a traditional conception of homework as a solitary activity and aimed at developing habits of independent learning. It may be, however, that independent learning is equated simply with individual learning rather than seeing it as something that need not preclude sharing, mutual support and help.

Some pupils wrote in their questionnaire comments such as the following:

> *"The thing I like least about homework its that it is a lonely and tedious activity."*

Primary school children often brought in the companionship of their dolls or teddy bears and discussed homework with them. Some described doing their homework by playing at schools. They would be the teacher, perhaps with their own small blackboard, and they would teach their dolls, or even younger brothers or sisters. One 8 year old described teaching his 4 year old brother to do the work he was doing in class such as maps and graphs and tables, and one had taught his three year old brother to read. Some parents described being brought in as class members, or as headteacher.

While secondary age children were less ready to admit to this way of working at home, even some pupils as old as fifteen and sixteen used a pretend audience to make their homework more palatable, as well as more effective;

> *"You learn it better when you have to teach it to someone else. Even if it is just a imaginary person."*

Patterns of Homework

There are also individual differences in how pupils plan their after school time. There appear to be three predominant patterns.

1) Getting it done

> *"I do my homework as soon as I get back from school around 4 o'clock. I watch television and have my tea. If I have any homework left I finish it after tea."*

2) Pacing it

> *"I usually start my homework around 6 or 7 but I'll space it out over maybe two or three hours. I do a bit of homework, watch TV, do a bit more work. I quite enjoy it because it isn't all work."*

3) Getting over school

> *"When I come home from school I am tired and I need a break so I go out with my pals, and then I come home and have my tea. I'll watch a bit of TV and then I'll go up to my room and do my homework, at about 7 o'clock. Sometimes I leave one or two things to the morning."*

As the following table suggests, there are differences according to the age of the child, most noticeable being the shift of pattern from primary to secondary.

"I begin my homework"

(% of pupils) **n = 1002**	primary	S1/2	S3/4	S5/6
as soon as I get home from school	46	21	19	15
in the early evening	37	60	54	62
in the late evening	14	14	21	15
in the morning	1	1	2	1
spread out	3	4	4	7

Management of homework is also affected by other domestic, cultural or religious priorities. For example, Muslim children are likely to spend two hours after school at the mosque, and often do not begin homework till 7 or 8 o'clock. Some children do paid work, such as paper rounds or helping in the family shop.

There are also different approaches to homework. For example, some children take their least favourite subject first and get it out of the way, allowing them to take time over what they are more interested in. Some start with the work they enjoy most, leaving the disliked work to the end. Some start with the easiest tasks, and leave the most difficult to the last. Some have an intermittent pattern of reward and drudgery.

> *"I do something good then something bad then something good and then something bad. I always work that way."*

While these individual differences are perhaps not surprising they do have implications for the kind of guidance given to pupils about how to approach their study. Leaving uncongenial and difficult work to the end, for instance, often meant that this work was tackled when the pupil was tired or least motivated, and if often meant it not getting done at all. This in turn led to trouble with the teacher, setting up a vicious circle of lowered motivation and increased difficulties.

Distractions and supports

More often than not young people did their homework to a background of tapes or records. Some said that they did this because it overcame the loneliness and provided company. More commonly pupils said that they found it easier to concentrate with music in the background, and quite often said that an older brother or friend had recommended music as a way of helping them work better. While many didn't know why this was helpful some were able to offer the following kind of explanation.

> *"You concentrate better because the music shuts out all the distractions and you get your own silence inside the music"*

Others described building a wall of sound behind which they were able to retreat.

> *"If I go to the library it's dead silent and every wee thing annoys you, like people coming in the door, or coughing and dropping things and whispering to each other and you strain to hear what they're saying. But at home it's like music builds a wall between you and the world and you don't hear the phone and the kids in the street, and the mum and wee brother having a bawling match. It's much better."*

The analogy of the wall was commented by on by parents

> *"When you go into her room it's like hitting a wall of noise, and she's sitting behind it totally absorbed in her work. She doesn't even notice me coming in and I have to shout to get her attention."*

Some teachers had been convinced by their pupils of the value of music as an aid to concentration and allowed pupils to wear their Walkmans in class. They had found this was positively beneficial to young people who were easily distracted by what was going on around them in the classroom.

> *"For the first time in their lives you see them with their heads down oblivious to all around. Sweet music to my ears."*

Some young people did their homework with the television on. Again there were many who were adamant that television helped them to concentrate, perhaps because it relieved the loneliness or because, like music, it provided a barrier against distractions. Some said that they were able to listen to the television while still concentrating on work, while for others television played a different kind of function, providing an intermittent distraction.

> *"I'll be doing my sums or writing a sentence and I'm not really watching the TV. It's just in the background, then something happens and I'll watch it for a bit then go back to working. It eases the pain."*

> *"I have the TV on with the volume down. I'm working but watching it sneakily. If something comes on that I really want to see I stop working and turn up the volume."*

Understanding different individual patterns of working helps to explain why some guides to study, and study skills programmes, had not been effective. It is common, for example, to find advice such as the following: "Choose an area which is quiet and free from distractions of television and music..." It is unlikely that any significant advance will be made in helping young people develop study skills until we help them to to build on, and modify where appropriate, their own preferred styles and approaches to work.

What are the competing claims?

Understanding pupils' approaches to work means understanding something about the implicit and explicit priorities that frame young people's time out of school. Pupils were asked in the questionnaire to name the three things they did most often apart from homework. The following table illustrates those responses.

"What do you do after school?"

(% of pupils mentioning specific activity)
n = 990

	primary	S1/2	S3/4	S5/6
Watching TV	69	70	73	67
go out/play with friends	51	58	61	46
sports	40	41	30	40
listen to music	9	18	28	40
reading	28	19	15	24
part time work	2	6	10	15
computer	16	16	8	2

The most striking aspect of this table is the remarkable degree of uniformity across age groups, although there is a clear progression with age in listening to music, and a commensurate decline in reading (the upturn in reading at S5/6 level appears to be related to study for exams). The computer appears as a more common pursuit for primary and early secondary age children, reflecting a tendency for computers to be used primarily for games.

Gender differences

Analysis of pupils' diaries reveals quite distinct patterns of leisure between girls and boys. The following table gives the percentage of pupils who describe a particular activity after school.

What do you do after school?

(% of boys and girls)
n = 452

	Primary		Secondary	
	boys	girls	boys	girls
TV	46	70	65	68
playing/socialising	39	35	17	14
sports/exercise	29	5	15	4
reading	11	27	12	18
housework	5	18	13	18
go out/go for a walk	9	14	10	17
clubs	3	6	5	10
looking after pets	3	5	3	6
listening to music	1	5	5	10
computers	10	2	1	0

There are many possible implications arising from these differences if they are replicated on a wider scale. For example, a national study of young people's leisure and lifestyle found that girls were less likely than boys to be involved in sports, and they also found a positive relationship between between leisure opportunities and attitudes to school and home work. In other words, leisure activities do not compete with homework. They actually enhance it. [15]

Another interesting aspect of the above table is the way in which leisure preferences may reflect influence parent and teacher expectations. Girls' activities are, particularly at primary age, more 'in the home' - watching TV, reading or listening to music, for example, so that as well as being 'expected' to do housework, girls may also be more available to do it. This becomes a difficult issue for girls in deprived families and sub-cultures where domestic duties begin to compete with homework. Interview evidence suggests that in these circumstances it is less of a problem for boys.

Television

Perhaps it is not surprising that the most popular pastime for all groups is television. There has been extensive research, mainly American, into TV viewing and its relationship with homework. A 1981 study of 55,000 high school pupils found that they averaged 28 hours a week of TV and 5 hours of homework. Other studies concluded that there was not a significant relationship between these two things. In other words, pupils had enough time in the week to do both, possibly because homework demands were relatively low. [16]

This study seemed to confirm the American evidence. Time spent watching TV ranged from none to 30 hours, averaging 1½ hours on week nights. The 'high TV' group included pupils who did an average, or even above average, amount of homework for their age and some who even described doing extra homework of their own volition because they were interested in it, or because they were bored with the alternative of television. There were also pupils who, on the evidence of their diaries, did very little apart from watching TV and did no homework at all, but who (apparently) would not have done any homework anyway. The suggestion that TV viewing and homework are able to co-exist may well be a valid one, at least until S5/6

However, it is also clear from diary and interview evidence that homework tends to be planned around television. Typically children and young people, from 5 to 18, would watch *Neighbours* and *Home and Away* and either finish homework before it, start homework after it, or spread homework around it.

A more serious competing claim as children grow older is part-time work. Some pupils and parents spoke about this as having a significant impact on study time and motivation to do homework.

> *"Sometimes my son who is a packer in a supermarket, will phone up on a Saturday evening to tell me a delivery has just come in and he has to work till 3 in the morning. He then sleeps in on Sunday and loses the whole weekend."*

Some of these other activities which young people engage in may of course not be inimical to their education, or may indeed contribute to their learning. The pupil questionnaire contained the following item: "Do you do anything in your own time that helps you learn about things that can help you in school?" The following were some things pupils described:

Things that help you learn

% of pupils mentioning specific activity
n = 822

	primary	S1/2	S3/4	S5/6
reading	41	46	60	70
research	20	3	3	4
maths	16	4	3	0
TV	16	15	23	29
computer	12	9	9	3
writing	11	9	1	0
art/craft	10	12	7	7

Other activities mentioned by pupils were playing at shops, making models, jewellery, keeping newspaper cuttings on specific topics, puzzles, crosswords, quizword books, reading history or natural history books.

One of the interesting features of the above table is the carry over of primary school activities, such as research and maths into the home context. Many primary pupils interviewed made up their own mathematics problems or played with mathematical puzzles because they found it stimulating or enjoyable. It would appear that as pupils progress through secondary this is less likely to occur, or that the kind of learning perceived as relevant to school diminishes in scope, although television plays a greater role.

Many teachers saw television as a resource to be exploited. They encouraged pupils to watch television with a specific purpose and in a constructive critical way. They built activities around television, often involving parents. Pupils' diaries completed in June showed the extent to which the World Cup football was used as a stimulus for writing reports, mathematical exercises, or media analysis, for example, usually giving a role to parents who also watched the matches.

Examples of using television

One secondary school had published a 50 page homework guide which was aimed at parents as well as pupils. It included the following activities:

- *Pupils are asked to study television schedules on a given evening. They have to work out who would watch what kind of programme. They then interview three people of different ages and interests. Having done this write a short set of conclusions and show these to their parent(s) or other adult, and ask if they agree with the conclusions. Parents' views are noted and conclusions amended as appropriate.*
- *Pupils think of their two favourite television adverts, and write down the product. They then ask their parent(s) for two favourites and write these down. They then use a worksheet which asks them to analyse these in terms of how the advert gets its message across - music, places, people, graphics, symbols and so on.*

In one primary 3 class pupils were helped to develop the concept of number by being asked to note examples from television of big numbers, for example, 200 in an airplane, 50,000 at a pop concert, half a million acres of rain forest. These examples were pooled and talked about in class.

In summary

Pupils have an individual approach to when, where and how they do their homework. Understanding that is an important prerequisite to devising strategies for supported study and independent learning.

Pupils tend to see homework as a solitary activity despite a curriculum which is progressively emphasising collaborative work. There is potential for making homework more of a co-operative venture.

Homework has to be seen in the context of competing attractions such as television, but these need not be seen as the enemies of learning, and may be used constructively by teachers.

Activities can be designed to give parents a role in their children's work at home.

Chapter 8

Monitoring and support the role of parents

Research consistently shows that parents want homework and use that as a criterion in their assessment of schools. Schools often resist these parental expectations believing that they are nothing more than a hangover from parents' own experiences. Sometimes that resistance springs from a belief that parents should not usurp the teacher's role, and that parent help is counter-productive.

However, to persist with no homework policies in the face of strong parental opposition is difficult for a school to justify. One primary headteacher who had moved from a 'no homework' to a homework policy explained his shift in the following terms.

> *"It is a question of community credibility. If we are going to be judged by whether or not we are a homework school we must meet that expectation but also meet it with a commitment to quality."*

Parents want homework for a number of reasons and, for the most part, feel they have a role to play. There would appear to be three main kinds of roles for parents - monitoring, support, and help. The following table illustrates parents' responses to six statements about their degree of involvement with their child's homework.

"Parental monitoring, support and help"

(% of parents) **n = 603**	very often	often	sometimes	never
I see homework	73	14	12	1
I talk about what he/she is doing	58	27	15	1
I help him/her with it	32	17	48	4
I do it for him/her	1	1	6	93
I leave him/her to get on with it	21	19	39	22

The picture presented by the above set of statistics suggests a high level of involvement by parents with their children's homework, the validity of which is born out by an examination of pupils' diaries.

Monitoring

Monitoring may simply take the form of looking at, or, signing pupils' homework. While some teachers argued that signing of work was a ritualistic exercise and achieved little, parents tended not to agree.

> *"It means I get a look at it and I get a damn good idea of how much effort she's putting into it. Just the writing alone. You can tell by if her writing is getting scrappier or her work is more careless. It's a good check."*

There was a marked difference between primary and secondary parents.

"I see my child's homework"

(% of parents)

n = 603	very often	often	sometimes	never
primary	83	13	4	0
secondary	33	27	37	4

While differences between primary and secondary schools are perhaps not surprising given pupils' move toward greater independence, the disparities among individual secondary schools are striking.

"I see my child's homework"

(% of parents in each school)

n = 91	very often	often	sometimes	never
Maplegrove Academy	12	27	60	2
Forges Secondary	50	25	20	5

While the statistics of themselves do not permit any definitive conclusions, they do raise questions about differences in school policy. Where the rationale and pattern of homework was not clearly communicated to parents and was left to pupils themselves to report, it made parental monitoring much more difficult.

> *"Children can be very literal. They say they have no 'homework' but what they don't tell you is that they've been asked to revise some schoolwork or study something on their own."*

One English research study found that the variable with the strongest relationship to time spent on homework was whether or not it was signed by a parent. [9]

Monitoring teaching

Monitoring homework was also useful for letting parents see what kind of work their pupils were doing in school.

"Seeing homework gives me a better idea of what's happening in school"

(% of parents)

n = 609	very often	often	sometimes	never
	47	50	3	0

Sometimes seeing homework provided parents with clues to the quality of teaching

> *"It tells what kind of work the teacher sees as useful. If they're giving them silly things to do you can guess there is a silly teacher behind it."*

However, it required a certain level of insight and skill to be able to monitor homework in this way. Many parents had had no opportunity to be informed of changes in teaching methods and therefore lacked insight into what teachers were trying to do. One parent, for example, complained that his daughter always got all her maths sums correct, clear evidence of falling standards since in his day you always got at least half of them wrong.

Where parents monitored homework they were in a better position to judge whether the standards that the teacher was demanding were realistic. They could, if they felt confident enough, do something about it.

> *"She was obviously stressed and not coping with it. I went down to the school and complained and the teacher said 'well, she should just do what she can'."*

This kind of direct action was, however, exceptional, and anxious or aggrieved parents often suffered in silence because they did not know what to do or did not feel confident enough to 'make a fuss'.

Some primary and secondary schools ask pupils to keep a journal in which to record not just their homework assignments but some comments on their approach to homework, or problems encountered. In some schools pupils kept a homework journal or self-assessment diary in which they evaluated their own work and in which parents could also comment and make some assessment, however brief, of their child's progress and achievement. This proved very helpful in giving parents' a specific role and in helping to clear up ambiguities and misunderstandings when they occurred.

Support

Most parents also said that they talked to their child on a fairly regular basis about what he or she was doing in school. While some of this has a monitoring, or quality control function, many parents explained that they talked to their children in order to show an interest, help their children take the work seriously, or to make them think more about what they were doing.

Responses to the question "I talk about what he/she is doing" showed slight differences from one school to the next, but the primary/secondary difference was more marked.

"I talk about what he/she is doing"

(% of parents) **n = 600**	very often	often	sometimes	never
primary	66	26	9	0
secondary	30	34	33	3

Parents who had been able to establish an expectation and routine around homework, found that they had very little to do except be in the background to offer help if needed, leaving the child to learn how to organise their own time and patterns of work/play.

> *"He's only in primary 6 but it's not too soon to learn that he's responsible for his homework. If his friends come round to play before he's finished I don't stop him going out. Sometimes he'll leave it till the morning but he always does it. If he wasn't it I would step in."*

Pupils' descriptions of their parents' role often illustrated this awareness of their background support and when not to call on them.

> *"They help me when if I ask but I know not to ask them if they're in a miffed off mood or if they're doing something important."*

Some parents found themselves constantly nagging and threatening and making homework an unwelcome chore. In some households homework was not enough of a priority. It upset the routine of the house, and if they put homework top in their priority list children couldn't be called on for help with younger brothers and sisters, cleaning and tidying, or doing the messages. Children sometimes made capital out of this. In reply to the question "the best thing about homework is..." 3% of pupils wrote "getting out of helping with chores in the house".

The critical role played by supportive adults was brought home by talking to young people from a wide range of backgrounds. There were those who lived in broken or unstable families, who lived with unpredictability and anxiety, whose parents were indifferent or even hostile to homework. On the other hand, there were those who felt secure and confident in stable relationships with a parent, parents, or other adults.

> *"If there's something I'm not happy with I just talk it over with my mum and dad. They're awful helpful, not just because they want me to do well, but because they're interested in me and what I do."*

Helping with homework

When it comes to helping their child there is a further drop in the number of parents who say they do this very often or often. Primary parent were much more likely than secondary parents to help their children with their homework.

"I help him/her with homework"

(% of parents)

n = 608	very often	often	sometimes	never
primary	38	19	41	2
secondary	8	9	69	14

These differences are generally explicable by the content of what children are learning. As pupils progress through the secondary, parents tend to feel less and less able to help because they lack the relevant knowledge. Nonetheless, a large majority of secondary parents felt that there were occasions where they could help in one particular area, and there were few parents who did not have some academic, vocational, or 'lived' knowledge, for example, in geography, languages, home economics, design, technology, office practice, current affairs, or social issues.

"I don't have enough knowledge to help my child"

(% of parents)
n = 602

	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
primary	1	7	48	44
secondary	17	56	23	5

These primary/secondary differences were more pronounced than differences between socio-economic groups as the following table shows:

"I don't have enough knowledge to help my child"

(% of parents in socio-economic group)
n = 602

	strongly agree/agree	disagree/strongly disagree
Professional	8	92
Intermediate	13	87
Skilled (non-manual)	19	81
Skilled (manual)	18	82
Semi-skilled	29	71
Unskilled	35	65
Full time parent/housewife	20	80

There is clearly an interaction between the two factors; occupational group and primary/secondary which is illustrated by a comparison of two primary and two secondary schools located in different socio-economic catchments.

"I don't have enough knowledge to help my child"

(% of parents in school)
n = 222

	strongly agree/ agree	disagree/ strongly disagree
Meadowpark Primary	5	95
Coalburn Primary	13	87
Maplegrove Academy	28	72
St John's Townships	50	50

It would therefore appear that as children move up through the school parents feel progressively less qualified to help their children but more acutely so where they themselves have less formal schooling.

There is a widespread agreement that homework can provide a common interest and bonding between parent and child, not just at early primary but in senior school as well. When children are very young reading to them or listening to their reading may play a key role in that bonding process, but equally in senior school when the interests of young people and their parents may have drifted apart, discussing school work can provide a common reference point. There was very little difference between primary and secondary parents in their response to the following question.

"It is good for our relationship to talk about homework together"
(% of parents)
n = 606

strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
36	58	5	1

Clarifying parents' role

Parents receive information about homework through school handbooks, information sheets or study guides, for example, but these often describe school policy without addressing the parent and his or her needs. What parents appreciate most is specific suggestions and advice about their role.

> *Try and make homework a time when you work together with your children as partners. In other words avoid acting as a sort of cross-examiner, judge, and executioner, in a sort of educational trial! For example, in going over a piece of reading together, ask your children to tell you what they liked about it, and then share with them your own enjoyment; ask them to tell you what, if anything, they found puzzling in the piece of writing, and then together sort out the puzzlement; ask them to tell you what associations the piece of writing has for them, what it reminds them of in their experience of reading other books or in their own experience of life, so as to encourage a personal response.*
>
> *If you want to do extra work with your children at home, consider the merits of the following extension activities: visiting a place of interest, playing a game or using a computer together, choosing books from the public library, developing skills in a sport or art or other hobby, or encouraging co-operative and constructive play with other children. These are all valuable aspects of education, and can properly be called "homework". It is often better to select such aspects than to try to "cram" you children's heads with extra academic work eg even harder sums or written exercises. As in all things, if in doubt, contact the school.*

One secondary teacher regularly sent home a small 6 page booklet with each new set of homework assignments. This included an explanation of the purpose of the assignment, what pupils were being asked to do, and what part parents could play;

> *"Dear Parent or Guardian,*
>
> *This homework assignment is being done while the class is studying Nina Bowden's novel "On the Run". It is intended to encourage pupils to consider the author's style and technique and to encourage*

> *investigation, interviewing, and reporting skills. Hopefully you will enjoy working on it too!*
>
> *Because some of the work involved in the assignment has to be spread over a period of time it is important that pupils 'pace' themselves rather than leaving everything to the last minute. Hopefully this will help their organisational skills, but some coaxing from you would help too."*

Providing information and clarification had to be backed up, however, by homework tasks which were designed, where possible, to give parents a role to play.

Parents clearly see homework as one of the hallmarks of a good school. While this may be an imperfect reason for having a homework policy one head argued that

> *"If we are serious about state schools we have to reassure parents that we rate achievement as highly as independent schools and that homework is a key factor in achievement."*

A role for the School Board

In one secondary school the Board had started out by listing their priorities and had placed homework at the top of the list. When shown the school policy by the headteacher they pointed out that it was quite a nice policy but nothing like what actually happened in practice. They asked the head to monitor the situation and discussed how that could most realistically be done. The head then reported back on the survey of homework practice and discussed with the Board how to take it forward. The consequence was, in the view of the head and depute head, that the approach to homework had improved dramatically.

> *"I can honestly say that we have not just tightened up on homework but that the quality is actually better. In the effort to rationalise homework across the school we have also tried to make it more imaginative and more useful."*

In summary

A school's credibility in the community is often considerably affected by its approach to homework.

Parents can play a crucial role in monitoring, supporting or actively helping their children.

Parents are often unsure of what kind of role to play and appreciate it when they are given advice by the school.

Most primary and secondary teachers agree that schools could do more to inform parents.

School Boards have a useful part to play in relation to homework and in communicating with parents about homework policy and parental involvement.

Chapter 9

Monitoring and support the role of the school

Many homework policies state that homework should not be assigned unless the teacher is going to provide comment and feedback. Most teachers agreed with this.

"Homework is only useful where teachers give feedback"

(% of teachers)
n = 202

	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
primary	17	72	9	2
secondary	32	45	19	4

However, it would appear from pupils' own reports that teachers frequently do not do this, and that parents are a much more likely source of help than the teacher.

"After I've finished homework I usually get helpful comments on it from ..."

(% of pupils)

n = 1004	primary	S1/2	S3/4	S5/6
the teacher	10	20	33	42
my parents(s)	60	59	38	14
parent(s)/teacher/other	24	7	4	20
I do homework but nobody ever looks at it	5	13	25	24

While it is clear that parents figure relatively less and teachers relatively more as pupils get older, the degree of support offered by parents and teachers is perhaps surprising.

How is this explained by teachers?

Seeking teachers help in interpreting this table it was pointed out that a lot of homework is not written and therefore is not looked at by the teacher. Collecting observations or words to be pooled in the class, for example, means that teachers do not see what children have produced, and in some classes pupils feed back to one another and play a part in assessing one another's work.

Most teachers said that regular monitoring of homework was time-consuming and often impracticable, particularly in the secondary school. It was common practice, therefore, to acknowledge that homework had been done by ticking the jotter or by circulating round the class and having a quick look at what pupils had done. In primary schools where there tends to be nightly homework, many teachers would try to establish a routine of collecting in homework in the morning, marking it during the day and returning it that same day. For some this meant taking half to three quarters of an hour at lunch time.

In some primary schools it was the practice to go over homework with the child present, but many teachers said they could not find the time for this, or did not see it as the most valuable use of that time. Going over homework with the child posed an even greater problem for secondary teachers who might see a class of thirty pupils for only an hour or two in the course of a week.

It was the policy of one school that all pages in a pupil's jotter had to have a tick to show that the teacher had seen it, and the depute head would monitor jotters from time to time to ensure that this was the case. Some schools, or secondary departments, went further. It was often departmental policy in maths or science, for example, for all mistakes to be corrected and the correct solution written alongside by the teacher. When it came to revision the homework jotter was then a useful record.

Some teachers made a point of rewarding all work with a personal or positive comments. It is perhaps easy to underestimate the effect this could have on a child, or his parents.

> *"Sandra had done an essay on her father. The teacher had put at the end 'Your dad must be a genius'. That was great. We all really liked that."*

It was also policy in some schools, or secondary departments to keep a systematic record of all homework marks, sometimes accompanied by comments on problems, and for this to be shown to parents at parents' evenings. In some cases a homework profile or a homework mark, perhaps 5% of the total, would be included in the report card assessment.

In some secondary subjects the Principal teacher took in homework books from time to time to monitor the standard of pupils' work, and in some cases to monitor the quality of teachers' feedback and ' comments.

The nature of the school's timetabling also plays an important role in determining teachers' ability to give feedback to pupils. The longer the period the more opportunity there is for teachers to use some of that time for looking at homework. One headteacher had used the extension of the period to impress this point on teachers:

> *"When we had a thirty five minute period I sympathised with teachers who said they just couldn't get the time to check homework. Since we moved to seventy minutes I could honestly say to teachers "You have absolutely no excuse for not doing it now."*

Many schools have, of course, gone the other way from the seventy minute to th eshorter period. In these circumstances the school needs to consider carefully how the monitoring of pupils' homework can besustained.

How is this explained by pupils?

Seeking clarification from pupils on the nature of helpful parent and teacher comments, there were two kinds of reply. Some pupils said that their teacher always marked homework but never commented on it. Others said that although they did get comments they weren't always 'helpful'.

> *"If they can see you don't understand it most teachers try and help you. But some just shout and bawl."*

Pupils tended to see parents as interested in their doing well and concerned when work was too difficult or hard to understand. It was easy to say to you parents that you had got the wrong answer and couldn't figure out how to get the right one. A parent might then make suggestions, go and look for a book or a dictionary, or take time out to understand.

Teachers tended to be seen more as assessors to whom you wished to present right answers even when you didn't understand why they were right. Asking for help was frequently seen as an admission of failure which was, in the words of one pupil was "punishable by death".

> *"They always say 'I've just spent ten minutes explaining that and then you come and tell me you don't understand'."*

Some pupils who had genuinely tried to do the work but had not been able to complete because of difficulty said that it was not always easy to let the teacher know this.

> *"Everyone comes out with all these lame excuses, their grannies have died for the third time this year, and then you come along and you feel embarrassed because the teacher thinks you're just somebody else making an excuse."*

While there were clearly many reasons for not doing homework which fell into the 'lame excuses' category, there was also clear evidence of pupils not feeling that they could get the kind of help from the teacher that would have been most useful to them.

How is this explained by parents?

Seeking clarification from parents on the question of help with homework a number of interesting differences between the parent and teacher role are highlighted. These have to do with:

a) knowledge and expertise
b) the context of work
c) the nature of the helping relationship.

The parent is often present, or available, while homework is actually being done. Feedback, support, or help can therefore be given when the task is still 'live'. Teachers see homework when the work is finished and perhaps even 'dead' as far as the pupil's interest and involvement is concerned. Parents sometimes gave up to an hour or more of sustained help, or were available to give help intermittently when it was needed. A teacher who could set aside as much as fifteen minutes for a review of individual homework (that is, thirty seconds per pupil) regarded this is a luxury. Parents are able to understand the context in which the homework task is set, the priorities and pressures, other competing claims, and how the child or young person actually goes about tackling his or her work. Teachers tend to see only the end product. Parents can offer help with organisational and study skills in the real context in which they arise. Teachers can only give second-hand or abstract advice.

Perhaps the most critical of the three aspects is the nature of the helping relationship. Parents have a long head start on teachers in this respect. For one thing they have the greater depth of experience, and a profound vested interest in their own child. Their perspective is also solely child-centred and concerned with success. Teachers have a partial view of a child, at best a concern and affection for that individual, at worst disinterest or even disregard. But whatever the degree and depth of their concern for the individual it has always to be tempered with equality and fairness, and the need to be seen as impartial and professional.

However, all these qualities which favour parents as helpers can also limit their potential to help. Because children and parents see each other at their worst, with age they become increasingly aware of their faults and shortcomings. They may also become less tolerant and more likely to express their impatience and frustration with one another.

When children are very young and starting school parents lack the authority and credibility of the teacher, even parents who are themselves teachers. The younger the child the more likely it is that he or she will perceive 'a right way' which is prescribed by the teacher and which does not admit of alternatives or re-interpretation by the parent.

> *"I'm not even allowed to read past page 6 in the reading book because the teacher said they were to read pages 3 to 6."*

This also has something to do with the nature of the authority in the teacher-pupil and parent-pupil relationship. The teacher has a personal authority as well as an authority derived from status and knowledge. The parent's authority tends to be only personal and the authority deriving from 'parent' status is likely to disappear in late primary or early secondary. Parents thereafter have to rely on this personal authority to encourage, to monitor, or to insist on homework being done. Teachers' authority was of itself often not enough to ensure that homework was done, and some form of sanction was seen as necessary.

Should failure to do homework be punished?

Homework is often seen by teachers as a thorn in the flesh, If it is set then it needs to be done, and if some pupils don't do it then others will resent the inequality of this and either stop doing it themselves or continue to resent the disparity of treatment and effort.

The consequence of this is that those who fail to do homework have to be hounded, coerced, and even punished. To complicate matters further, while it may be reasonable to use sanctions against pupils who don't work in class, it is difficult to have jurisdiction over what children do at home, and sometimes unreasonable to expect it.

Extra work, lines or having homework doubled were sanctions quite commonly used, but these were frowned on by many teachers and parents because the primary effect of this was to make homework more disagreeable. Punishment exercises also tended to be given higher priority than homework so possibly exacerbating the problem. Nor did giving punishments do anything to help teacher-pupil or parent-child relationships, especially in a situation where these were already strained.

While teachers were divided on the question of whether or not children should be punished for failure to do homework, a majority favoured the retention of sanctions.

"Pupils should never be punished for not doing homework"

(% of teachers) **n = 201**	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
primary teachers	15	33	52	0
secondary teachers	4	28	57	12

There were, however, marked differences from one school to the next.

"Pupils should never be punished for not doing homework"

(% of teachers)
n = 106

	strongly agree/agree	disagree/strongly disagree
Newstreets Primary	100	0
Meadowpark Primary	19	81
Greylands High	17	83
Forges High	61	39

Greylands High is much closer to Newstreets Primary in its philosophy than it is to Forges High. These differences and similarities are not a question of individual belief, but of school policy, but it is apparent from this research that what teachers do believe is very often significantly affected by a policy which they only come to internalise once they have practiced it.

These are, however, statements about belief and not necessarily about practice. What strategies do teachers use when pupils fail to do homework?

What do you do if pupils fail to do homework?

(% of responses including multiple responses)
n = 305

	primary	secondary
give another chance to complete	22	19
do homework in school	19	1
use persuasion	14	14
inform parents	12	17
report to Head (primary	4	-
detention	2	4
verbal reprimand	2	7
note it on report card	2	8
give extra work	1	16
report to guidance (secondary)	-	11
other	22	3

While some primaries and secondaries emphasised persuasion and support, others placed greater emphasis on extra work, detention or other sanctions. Persuasion and allied strategies tended to be a feature of schools which did not use sanctions such as lines, detention or extra work. Persuasion took a variety of forms but most typically it meant stressing the value and importance of independent work and self-motivation. It was normally coupled with giving pupils another chance, sometimes asking them to return at the interval or lunch-time to reinforce the message or ascertain if difficulties existed. Consultation with guidance or a letter to parents were usually a recourse where persuasion and support had failed to work.

In schools which were against punishment for lack of homework, there usually existed a range and hierarchy of responses.

Greylands High School

Strategies for dealing with no homework

Encouragement
Giving help at interval or lunch-time
Consulting with guidance informally
Referring to learning support
Extending period for completion
Asking for it to be signed by parent
Showing strong displeasure, giving verbal warning
Noting omission in pupil's jotter or homework jotter
Noting pupil's name in progress record and monitoring future performance
Sending letter to parents
Referring to guidance
Meeting with parents or home visit

It was common practice for parents to be sent a letter at the beginning of the year asking them if they wished their child to be given homework or not. If children then failed to do homework after a reminder parents would be contacted to inform them of the lapse.

By upper secondary it was commonly felt that sanctions or the monitoring of homework by parents was no longer appropriate and that pupils, or 'students', ought to carry responsibility themselves for what they did or failed to do. Some schools dropped any requirement at this stage for parental oversight while some still required evidence of a parental signature.

It was also felt by some teachers that they could do more to capitalise on young people's natural desire to be seen in a good light and to see themselves in a good light.

> *"Most young people want to do well. They want to please their mums and dads, and their teachers."*

However, such expectations carry weight only as long as pupils have some concern for what teachers or parents think of them, and teachers who have lost respect may then have to resort to threats and sanctions.

What do you do if pupils fail to do their homework?

> *"Nag, nag, (shout), reason with them, jump up and down"*
>
> *"Everyone is allowed a second chance. The vast majority of pupils respond to this. The few who do not are given one week in which to complete a recorded punishment exercise and the original homework. If either is not handed in, the pupil is referred to the guidance teacher."*
>
> *"Encourage, cajole, complain. Sometimes a letter home is an essential follow-up."*
>
> *"No punishment given but always try to encourage young people to see value in the work they are being asked to do."*
>
> *"Give them another chance - it usually works. Usually discuss problems incurred. Sometimes meet them in lunchbreak to help them do it."*

The role of guidance

In secondary schools guidance staff are usually brought in to deal with problems over homework. They are seen as the link between home and school and sometimes mediate between teachers and parents. Guidance staff generally do not like being used in a policing capacity , and try to discourage teachers from using them as just another form of sanction or pressure point. This may be a matter of school policy, and guidance often become involved only where they can offer support to the child or family.

Guidance teachers often did this by helping teachers to put their demands on young people in a family or community context. In some schools there were large numbers of pupils who had recently experienced the death or separation of parents, who lived between two households, who stayed with grannies or aunties, with foster parents or in children's homes.
In some households it is the older children who manage the family or who do after school jobs to support the family financially. Many of these young people suffer a double disadvantage because not only is homework a low priority but if they do find the time and energy to do it there may no private space, no available resources and no adult help or support.

Sometimes guidance staff put teachers in the picture, but sometimes kept the confidence of the family and asked teachers to simply "go easy" They were, in some instances, able to make specific suggestions as to what teachers could do.

> *"Just laying off doesn't necessarily help. It may be very important for a child struggling with her self-esteem to have homework like everyone else. It is possible to meet that personal and social need but at the same time make homework more manageable."*

Nor is it simply a matter of dealing with young people who fail to do their homework There is a problem, often unrecognised, of young people who put a great deal of pressure on themselves and whose anxiety is only satisfied by doing extra work. Some pupils believe that the more time spent on homework the better their prospects. Often they are merely time-serving or working counter-productively by rote-learning and committing large chunks of material to short-term memory.

It is important to discover how young people are tackling their learning, to help them understand what are useful approaches to study, and to help them deal with their anxieties. Guidance teachers are often in the best position to get a better understanding of such pressures and they can play an important role in helping develop strategies for more effective study.

Often the guidance teacher has to rely closely on the expertise of learning support teachers in assessing learning or emotional difficulties and developing strategies for children with special needs.

The role of learning support

It tends to be widely assumed that lower-achieving children should get less homework than 'brighter' or more highly achieving pupils, and this is tends to be reflected in practice. A more convincing case can be made for such children having, if not more homework, at least homework specifically tailored to their needs. In some schools this service was provided by learning support staff who provided help to teachers in differentiating homework . For example, a disruptive first year pupil, whose behaviour was a response to reading difficulties, was helped by ensuring that worksheets for him were blown up to double size. A dyslexic 5th year girl was able to get university entrance because the learning support teacher recognised her inability to scan texts and helped to teach her the relevant techniques. Teachers were helped to adapt the language of assignments or homework instructions, or to structure homework tasks or worksheets for children who needed to be taken gradually through materials with every step explained. What were apparently learning or behaviour problems might be auditory or visual problems.

In some schools learning support teachers worked closely with parents on a regular basis and were, able to monitor pupils' work at home and school More crucially, though, they were able to help parents to play the central role in supporting and teaching their children.

> *"The dividends are sometimes nothing short of miraculous. In a nutshell it is because parents can achieve what we never could in the school."*

Pupils' achievement could be dramatically enhanced by providing a parent support group in which they could reassure and help one another. This was particularly important for parents who were highly anxious, ashamed of or even punitive towards their children A common reaction to the first parent meeting was relief at discovering that their children were 'normal'.

In schools with such parent support groups, the first meeting of parents was critical because an ethos and relationship could be established whereby parents were encouraged to use the phone or to drop in at the school whenever they wished. Having established that 'contract', it was important that learning support staff and other staff reinforced that invitation with a warm welcome whenever the offer was taken up.

Parents whose children had specific learning difficulties were almost always keen to play an active role, to attend regular workshops in the school and to take the time at home to work with their children. It raised the following question with one teacher

> *"Why if we can get these parents who are as big a cross section of social class as you'll get anywhere, can't we if we try hard enough get any parentt whose child has a difficulty in learning?*

Diane - frequently didn't produce her homework. When it was finally discovered at 11 that she was very short sighted she got glasses, which improved her schoolwork and homework significantly. However, she frequently appeared at school without her homework and her glasses, saying she had lost or broken them. The guidance and learning support teachers working together persuaded the nother to come into school at which point they discovered that her mother was wearing Diane's glasses and wouldn't buy herself a pair because she 'couldn't afford it'. They were able to get her glasses for herself.

Kevin's mother and father had separated when he was 9. His mother could not look after him and he went to a children's home. After eight different foster families, he was sent to another home and at the time of interview was in a third home. The learning support teacher discovered that part of Kevin's problem was sympathetic teachers not giving him homework. However, he wanted, at least in this respect to be like all the other children in his class. She was able to arrange suitable homework for Kevin.

Donna's attendance was very erratic in the third year and one of the reasons for this was her being punished for failure to do homework. The guidance teacher went to visit her home and discovered that Donna worked for four hours after school in the family shop, and also looked after her chronically ill father. Her mother, who spoke very little English, needed help to cope with six younger children. The guidance teacher got in touch with the Social Work Department who knew nothing about the family. Provision of a homemaker, the support of a social worker, help for Donna from learning support teachers, and discussions with her subject teachers, improved her school attendance and motivation.

Home visiting

Home visiting is a valuable form of support for pupils and parents but is not commonly used mainly because it is expensive on teachers' time, and seen by many teachers as intrusive or unsafe.

Primary, secondary and special school which have initiated home visiting in a systematic way have usually been enthusiastic because they were often able to solve a problem or establish a relationship which could not have been achieved by any other means. Home link teachers and bilingual assistants who work with families whose home language is not English, have been able to play a crucial intermediary role where there were language or cultural barriers.

Some schools which had enjoyed the services of home link teachers but then lost them had seen this as such an important element of the school's work that they had built it into whole school policy. For example, one primary school created a role for a senior teacher whose responsibility was to manage staff, cover, and arrange time off in lieu, so that a home visit became an option for any teacher where it was seen as necessary.

Skills for independent learning

Many secondary schools had recently introduced study skills, as part of an English course, in Social Education periods, or as a module in its own right. In some schools there was no direct teaching but a booklet which pupils took home. Both written and taught study skills tended to include advice on selecting a place to study, planning and prioritising time, organising resources, pacing work and leisure, using working time efficiently, and developing strategies for studying more effectively.

These often contained a lot of useful information, and it was, therefore, disappointing that pupils often said that they did not find this advice valuable. The explanation for this is that some advice is unrealistic, and that general precepts are not always valid for individual circumstances. For example, study skills quite typically suggest that pupils find somewhere quiet on their own, and assume that they will sit at a desk. In fact some pupils find it easier to work in company, and somewhere with background noise, and have a wide range of places where they work - on the floor, at a table, or on their bed. Because approach to study is so individual and contextualised the most helpful advice appears to be that which takes as its starting point what pupils actually do and attempts to work from there.

A session on independent study

Pupils are asked to identify: a) some recent occasion when they thought they were working well at their homework b) some recent occasion when they thought they were not working well. They then work in groups of four or five and share their findings with the others, drawing up lists of things that help and things that hinder. These are listed on a poster and put up on the wall. The teacher then compares what the different small groups have come up with and tries, with help from the groups, to identify useful commonapproaches and useful individual approaches. Individuals then agree to monitor their work the following evening and write a short report which will provide the starting point for the next meeting.

One pupil wrote in his questionnaire

> *"School should have a period after school for about 1-2 hours aday because then if a pupil is stuck the teacher could be at hand to help the person stuck. It would be best for the teachers too so then they don't give out lines to pupils who haven't done their homework because they know it would be done in class."*

A teacher wrote the following

> *"If a pupil fails to do homework there should be some backup from the school. an arrangement should be made to allow pupils to stay late (after 3:30) to do homework in school. I would certainly be happy to supervise homework after normal hours if it is difficult for pupils to do it at home."*

Some schools use lunchtimes for guided study and give priority access to computers to pupils whose needs are greatest. In some schools learning support staff are timetabled over lunch periods when pupils can have access to them, and some do try to provide help and access to resources after school. There is, perhaps scope to innovate and experiment more with schemes for supported study after school. In some areas schools have tried rearranging or extending the school day to distinguish between taught courses and independent work supported by teachers. The latter may commence in mid afternoon, on a twilight basis, or in the evening. In some areas consideration is being given to follow Belfast's lead in the setting up of SWOT centres to which pupils can go outside school hours to study or get help with their studying.

Strathclyde Region is currently developing a pilot initiative with eight schools on supported self study. Each school will develop its own approach but common features will be the provision of a welcoming environment for pupils (and possibly their parents) to use outwith school hours in which there will be 'tutors' to be available to pupils at their request. Other possibilities include hotlines or telephone links with teachers who agree to be available at specified times. These initiatives will be evaluated to see if there are important wider applications.

In summary

The older the pupil, the more he or she will rely on the teacher, rather than parents, for support and feedback about homework.

The fact that regular monitoring of homework is time-consuming for teachers lends weight to the argument that it should only be given where it is clearly useful and plays an integral part in learning and teaching.

Some pupils are reluctant to let teachers see their mistakes or admit to not understanding the work. This suggests an inappropriate understanding of homework which ought to be discussed by teachers, pupils, and parents.

Most teachers believe in retaining sanctions for failure to do homework, but effective learning support, guidance, clear school policy and high expectations of classroom teachers may go a long way to obviating the need for sanctions.

There is room for innovation and experiment with supported study schemes, and other initiatives which encourage independent learning.

Chapter 10

Towards better practice

Rather than debating the pros and cons of homework, discussion should turn on questions of purpose and quality, acknowledging that independent learning out of school is a vital ingredient in educational motivation and achievement.

The evidence strongly suggest that homework can be either a dull and dreary task without any apparent meaning, or something that plays an integral role in the curriculum and is indispensable to personal and academic achievement. If it is to be better we need both principles and models of good practice.

Homework tends to be primarily of four types - finishing off work started in class, doing work that is self-contained or runs parallel with what is being done in class, spontaneous homework, or preparing work for a future class. While each of these approaches has its advantages and disadvantages, the balance of advantage is greater in some than others.

1 Finishing off

One of the common approaches to homework is to ask pupils to finish off classwork. The advantages that teachers claim for this approach is the clear relationship between what is studied at home and in school. The curriculum is systematically covered and there is no ambiguity about what is expected. Homework need not be prescribed because pupils know that as a matter of course that they have to complete the work in their own time. In this respect it gives them some personal responsibility for their learning.

Finishing off as also justified as a strategy because teachers couldn't know how far they would get and because all kinds of contingencies and individual difficulties arise in the life of a classroom.

However, finishing off has its pitfalls. For some pupils it can mean no homework at all for quite extended periods, and for others consistently large amounts of homework. It often means that the slowest pupils and those most in need of help are left with the most homework to do, and may have to tackle work in a home environment where they got no support or guidance. This sets up a vicious circle whereby those most disadvantaged by home circumstances have to take most work home. At its worst this might mean regularly finishing off in five or six subjects, a duty that can become less and less congenial and more and more dispiriting. One secondary headteacher who prohibited this form of homework commented:

> *"If it is essential work then it must be done in the class and teachers must plan their time accordingly. Finishing off at home indicates to me bad planning."*

2 Self-contained or parallel homework

Many teachers favour work which is started and completed at home and usually marked by the teacher. In other words it is quite separate and distinct from classwork and yet closely related to it. This approach to homework has the advantage of being specific and unambiguous. The nature of the task can be thought through with a structure and purpose, and guidelines given as to standards of performance, criteria for assessment, and how long it should take to complete.

In some schools homework jotters and class jotters are kept separate and both can be dealt with as separate and parallel entities. Taking this principle further some schools have a homework curriculum which is planned and laid out alongside the class curriculum. The advantage to this approach is that work in school and at home can be planned as complementary activities and a term, or even the year's, timetable seen in advance.

The pitfall of this approach is the sacrifice of flexibility and spontaneity and, unless carefully planned, puts at risk the dynamic relationship between in-school and out-of-school work.

3 *Spontaneous work*

Some teachers, particularly in primary schools, favoured homework which arose spontaneously and creatively out of what was happening in the classroom. For example, a video, a book, or a class project might kindle children's interest and lead to suggestions on how this could be explored further at home or in the community.

The greatest benefit of this was that it made homework 'live' and integrally related to what was happening in the class. It also meant that ideas could come from pupils as well as the teacher, and pupils could therefore take more responsibility for their own learning in and out of school. Sometimes the focus for study was something quite incidental to the lesson, but was sparked off by a pupil's question. For example, an almost casual reference to synagogues in a reading book had led one pupil to ask what a synagogue was. The teacher spent 10 minutes discussing with the class how they would find an answer to this question, and in what ways, depth, and detail that question could be answered.

In one school where pupils often came up their own ideas for homework, the head commented:

> *"Don't be afraid to learn from pupils. When you share responsibility with them for what they learn they can come up with some ideas that you'd never have thought of in a million years and they can teach you a thing or two."*

The biggest problem in this approach is in not allowing for advance planning, something which begins to assume considerable importance in the secondary school.

4 *Preparation*

Homework may take the form of reading or research done in advance of the lesson. It could mean preparing reading, or collecting words. Sometimes it was a simple research task such as listing all the foods in the kitchen cupboard prior to a lesson on nutrition, or rehearsal of a part in a play, a prepared talk, a design, or a piece of music. It could take the form of a more complex joint project where each pupil, or group of pupils, had a role to play in researching or collecting materials which they then put together in class as a report, a mural, an exhibition or a publication. In denominational schools it often included preparing for religious sacraments.

One of the primary advantages claimed for this approach is that it gives pupils a stake in the lesson to come and makes school work much more a product of pupils' own efforts. It is argued that this home to class work, rather than class to home work, lets the teacher in on the production, rather than the review, stage of learning. In other words, the teacher is there to help pupils to synthesize, to formulate, and use their learning, rather than asking them to do this on their own after it has been presented to them in school.

The potential pitfalls in this approach are that the teacher has to rely on pupil initiative and invention as a base for classroom teaching. It may also disadvantage those who are most dependent and most insecure and who may get least support from parents. For this approach to be successful teachers have to be clear about the purposes, consider the resources that are likely to be required, and have assessed the skills of pupils relative to what they are being asked to do.

Principles of practice

Further evidence on the relative merits of these four approaches is provided by an analysis of pupils' accounts. Nine key principles emerged:

1 Homework should be clearly related to ongoing classroom work

Finishing off class work tended to be quite popular with those who did this quickly and so left themselves with little to do at home, but it was unpopular with the slowest. One of the demotivating features of homework was when the pupil couldn't see the purpose of it or see how it followed from what was being studied in school. This could sometimes happen with parallel or preparatory homework.

> *"It's got to be about things you're studying. Sometimes you get stuff which has nothing to do with what you did in class, and you've no idea why you're being asked to do it."*

2 There should be a clear pattern to classwork and homework

Pupils disliked teachers who were unpredictable and erratic in their demands and liked teachers who were methodical about homework and whose expectations were clear. If teachers followed a set routine it made it easier to plan your own homework, especially in the secondary school where the ability to predict homework was at a premium.

> *"Where there is a clear pattern to it, homework is given out in advance, you know when it is due, and when you give it in you know when you will get it back, and teachers will have commented on it"*

3 Homework should be varied

Homework became drudgery when it was frequently of the same type and called on a narrow range of skills or styles of learning. Pupils welcomed variety, change of pace and change of activity.

> *"You're not just sitting there all the time poring over a book, you're doing an investigation, preparing an argument for a discussion, interviewing someone, or writing about something that you're really interested in. That's OK."*

4 Homework should be manageable

It was also important that homework was manageable within the resources that were available. Homework was also resented when pupils got too much, no matter how interesting or enjoyable some of it might be. Knowing it was achievable in a given amount of time made it less daunting.

> *"I don't mind homework as long as there's not tons and tons and tons of it."*

5 *Homework should be challenging but not too difficult*

Pupils also reported frustration with work that was too easy This seemed most likely to occur when homework was given on a whole class basis. Homework was liked if it presented a challenge but was not too difficult. It helped when the teacher had explained or gone over the work, giving an example of how it should be tackled.

> *"Mrs Brown always gives us one example and shows how we should tackle it, and tells us what to do if we are stuck."*

6 *Homework should allow for individual initiative and creativity*

In reply to the question "Name one piece of homework that you have particularly enjoyed or found most useful" most pupils instanced project or research work which had kindled their interest and had given them scope to explore, invent, or create something of their own.

> *"I like something that gives you scope, like writing an essay on something that really interests you, or finding about things that nobody else knows about and you are the expert."*

7 *Homework should promote self confidence and understanding*

Homework was appreciated when it helped pupils feel more confident in their abilities. Preparatory research work made classwork more interesting and was liked because pupils themselves had contributed to the lesson. They also appreciated when their own ideas or opinions were valued.

> *"I like Modern Studies homework because it's your own and any answer you give is OK, as long as you can argue for it"*

8 *There should be recognition or reward for work done*

> *"You feel really great when you've prepared something and the teacher thinks it's good and the whole class has a discussion about it."*

One of the most frustrating experiences reported by pupils was where they had conscientiously done the homework but teachers failed to acknowledge this or provide feedback

> *"You've sat up to 11 at night and you come in and others haven't done it and the teacher says 'OK let's just forget about it this time' and for those who've done it it's really annoying. You leave your jotter open on the desk hoping he'll see it."*

9 *There should be guidance and support*

Many pupils received support and help from their parents and were grateful for that. Sometimes parents were able to help pupils with the organisation and planning of their work. Sometimes this kind of help was not available at home and it was provided by teachers.

> *"It wasn't until sixth year I learned how to organise myself properly. It made a hell of a difference but I wish someone had shown me five years ago."*

Homework in the curriculum

The following are four examples of class and home work which meet the criteria of relevance, manageability, challenge, variety, initiative, ownership and support.

Primary 7 - North American Indians

The class were studying North American Indians and were looking at differences among different tribes. The teacher suggested that the best way of handling this might be for pupils themselves to do the research and the teaching of this. Having presented the class with the problem of how to do this she asked them to do a bit of brainstorming in small groups and come up with some suggestions. In the whole class discussion which followed pupils decided that they would divide into 5 groups, each taking a different tribe, for example, the Pueblos, the Sioux, the Apaches.

In two weeks from that date each team would take responsibility for 20 minutes of class time in which they would present their research to the rest of the class. The teacher would make herself available to give advice at specified consultancy times during the following two weeks. Teams were encouraged to share ideas and resources with one another and a useful sources directory was set up for pupils to note good sources of information. Teams were then left to do some initial planning and allocation of tasks, and arranging times to meet as a team outside school. Before proceeding the teachers met with each team to review their planning and allocation of time, and ensure that what they had taken on was manageable and realistic.

Secondary 1 - The mathematics of smoking

As part of the first year mathematics curriculum, pupils were conducting investigations, one of them into costs of smoking. As homework for one week ahead pupils were asked to do the following:

- Find out how much the average smoker spends on cigarettes in a year
- Suggest three things that could be done with the same amount of money.

To find the answer to these questions it was suggested that they interview parents or other adults who smoked or had given up smoking. The teacher explained that when they brought back their results they would be asked to compare results in groups of three. As each person explained their results the other tow in the group would have to be prepared to ask critical questions such as:

- What is the basis of your evidence?
- How did you calculate the average?

Having done this the groups were then asked to average the three sets of findings, choose three of the best ideas for alternative spending, and report back to the rest of the class.

Secondary 3 - Trial by television

The curriculum for Religious Education for the year signposted points at which major homework tasks would be undertaken, and the teacher went through these briefly with the class at the beginning of the year. One of these involved making a 15 minute documentary television programme on the trial of Christ.

Each pupil chose or was given a role; Barabbas, Herod, Pontius Pilate, studio anchorperson, reporter on the spot, director, camera operator or witnesses. As prepared work at home they had to read New Testament accounts of the trial and think of it from the point of view of their chosen character or role, preparing to be interviewed, to interview, or to report on and summarise interviews.

Pupils were encouraged, where feasible, to collaborate with classmates out of school, and to practice on their parents. This all came together during a 50 minute period of RE.

Secondary 5 - Team mastermind

As revision for their study of the Second World War each pupil in the class was asked to devise five Mastermind questions which they would bring with them for the following period in three days. The questions should

- be challenging
- require reasoning and, as far as possible, avoid simple recall of facts
- have a prepared answer

In class pupils worked in groups of five and pooled their questions. Out of the 25 they were asked to come up with 10 which they would put to another team. Each team was allowed one further teaser question which could go beyond what had been studied. If the answers for the teasers were not forthcoming in class they would be left to pupils for research for the next History period.

Pupils were encouraged to try out their question on their parents or another adult with the following caution:

"Explain what you are doing and say you want to test out the questions, not to find out if people know the answers (because most people probably don't) but to get their advice on whether they think they are good questions and are easily understood."

A curriculum for parents

Schools have increasingly acknowledged the role played by parents in their children's learning, and have tried to find ways to develop the home-school partnership. One of the most effective appeaoches is the workshop. Workshops take three main forms.

1 *Helping with the parent role*

Woskshops in the early primary tend to focus on the parents' role in their children's learning. These are sometimes simply to do with reading or hearing reading. Some schools hold a series of such workshops covering a range of skills and interests, for example

- developing vocabulary - what you can talk about with your child, how to encourage self-expression, how to discuss events, and ask questions
- developing listening skills - how to help children listen to a story, retell a story, follow instructions, recognise rhyming words.
- developing the relationship between reading and writing by getting children to help with shopping lists, reading labels of packets and tins, signs and prices in shop windows
- developing number skills by sorting, matching things, comparing, weighing, timing things, talking about distances, patterns and shapes
- using music and drama to express ideas, by encouraging dressing up, making masks or costumes, clapping rhythms, making up songs or poems.

Further up the primary workshops are used in environmental studies to give parents an insight into ways they can use their local area, domestic routines, household events to help children deal with issues such as safety, conservation, vandalism, pollution, amenities and recreation, or environmental planning.

2 *The taster workshop*

Curriculum workshops on mathematics, language or environmental studies are more and more a feature of primary schools. One of the formulae for these is to let parents experience the work that their children are doing and then discuss it afterwards. An example of this at secondary level is the "Skills for Adolescence" material which includes as an integral part, tasks which involve the parent and a series of parent seminars which bring together class and home learning.

Parents are taken through the same activities as their children by their children's teacher in their children's classroom with pupils' work on the walls. The workshops focus on aspects of personal and social development such as communication, decision-making, dealing with conflict, self confidence and assertiveness. This process serves a number of functions. It gives parents a first hand insight into curriculum content and process, into the teacher-learner relationship, and at the same time allows them to deal with some of their own issues of confidence and conflict. There are also benefits for the teacher.

> *"It has been for me the most useful thing I have done. It just suddenly set my teaching in a totally new context It provided the missing side of the triangle."*

3 Meeting parents' own needs

If the taster workshop meets some of the parents' needs by an approach which is ostensibly about their children's experience, the second model does the reverse. It involves parents at the level of their own needs and in the process gives them a better insight into their children. For example, in one primary school there is a workshop for parent in 'metres and litres' in which they discuss how to use the decimal system to measure rooms for wallpapering, work out curtain lengths, estimate quantities of paint or calculate tiling for kitchens or bathrooms. One of the cover purposes of this is to develop parents' knowledge and confidence to help their children.

The scheme developed as a result of a workshop for parents on using computers which became so popular that parents, in an area of multiple deprivation, were gaining skills which enabled them to re-enter the labour market, and as a consequence of their own enhanced self-image had more time and patience with their children.

> *"I saw women who hadn't cared about themselves or their appearance become smartly turned out and with a new tip for themselves. It had a wonderful spin-off on their weans."*

Developing policies

The word 'policy' has different connotations. In its best sense it refers to a framework of principles which provide a helpful reference point for teachers, pupils, and parents. There is a lot to be learned from schools which have, over a period of time, evolved a homework policy from the grass roots upwards, and in which all teachers have played a part.

One primary school in this study took two years to get the policy right and for that policy to be owned by the teachers who were required to implement it. This did not, of course, imply that the school was, for two years without a policy, because from the very first week of discussions about homework practice the issue was on the agenda for all teachers, and policy had, in a sense, already begun.

In another primary school the head started the process by asking staff to collect good ideas for homework, and over a period of a few weeks he collected these in. Having systematised these and slipped in some ideas of his own he then fed these back to staff for comment and modification. These then provided the basis for staff discussion and policy formulation.

> *"We started with the meat and then added the bones."*

In one secondary school the senior management team prepared a draft of suggestions about homework policy which they then circulated to the whole staff. One of the outcomes of this consultation process was a decision to monitor and evaluate present attitudes to homework, and a questionnaire went to all pupils, parents, and teachers. The results of these questionnaires were then fed in to the policy development process. Indeed it was emphasised by the management team that policy should not be seen as something static but always subject to review by staff who were implementing it.

It is perhaps unrealistic to expect that all staff, especially in a large secondary school, will observe and happily carry through a policy simply because they have been consulted about it, but they should be required to observe it, nonetheless. If policy exists it is then has to be communicated to, and discussed with, pupils and parents, and they then have every right to challenge teachers who are not observing that policy.

One primary school within this study had a consultative committee of parents and a consultative committee of pupils who also played their part in the formulation and monitoring of policy. In some schools the Board has played that role either though the whole Board or by setting up committees and inviting 'experts' (teachers, pupils, or parents) to sit on those committees.

These same principles of negotiation apply at the level of the classroom. Teachers who negotiated their policy with the class reported fewer problems with management and supervision of homework. One secondary departmental policy emphasises this:

> *"Most success will be achieved when the pupil has been actually involved in the process of setting his/her own homework in 'negotiation' with the teacher. The majority of pupils respond well to this 'adult' treatment. When together teacher and pupil have agreed on the amount of homework that the pupil is realistically able to tackle in a particular timescale, then most of the problems associated with homework can be eliminated early on."*

Regional and national policy

It is not enough, however, that individual schools develop their own policies. This is most sharply brought home by the disparities among primary schools serving the same secondary, or by differences from one secondary to another. It is reasonable to expect that secondaries draw up homework policies in consultation with associated primaries, and liaise with other secondaries in the area. Again School Boards may play a useful role in this.

The existence of a broad framework of policy at regional level would ensure that there was not too great a variation in practice from area to area. Some regions are in the process of developing such a policy.

In summary

There are different patterns to classroom and home learning. Those which are most successful emphasise the relationship between the two, with homework building on and feeding into what happens in the classroom.

Pupils appreciate homework which is clear in its purpose, well planned, systematic and supported by teachers and/or parents.

There are different ways of developing a partnership with parents, but all should ultimately help them to play a more informed role in their child's educational development.

The process of building a policy within a school can fruitfully involve all staff. Parents and pupils may play a part in the formulation and monitoring of policy

Annex

Policy principles

The following principles, derived from information offered by teachers, parents, and pupils in this study provide one possible framework for a school's homework policy.

School policy

- The school has a policy on homework.
- There is clear rationale for homework based on discussion and analysis of the different purposes it serves, and a clarification of which of these the school regards as a priority
- Policy is arrived at, as far as possible, through consultation and discussion among the whole staff.
- Learning support and guidance staff (and where relevant ESL or home link teachers) play a key role in the development of policy.
- Policy is known by all staff, by all pupils, and parents.
- There are mechanisms for effective dissemination and discussion of policy among staff, pupils, and parents.
- Pupils, parents, and teachers play an active part in the monitoring, evaluation and review of homework policy

Homework tasks

- Homework tasks clearly meet the aims and objectives claimed for them. For example, work which encourages self-discipline and good habits must provide strategies which support and promote these.
- Homework tasks are constructed carefully in the light of the best evidence and research on how children learn. This is most critical in areas where homework may be ineffective or counter-productive, for example, in relation to reading and spelling.
- There is variety and a range of activities which include, for example, reading for information, reading for pleasure, summarising or 'mapping', problem-solving, using media, researching.
- Homework is seen as a collaborative venture and pupils are involved in devising their own homework.

- Pupils have a sense of ownership and responsibility for their work out of school
- There is recognition and reward for initiatives and independent work which pupils take of their own accord in their own time.

- Homework is only prescribed when it is purposeful and useful.

- Homework is only prescribed when it is going to be put to use in class work or when it can be followed by feedback from the teacher or from other pupils.

The nature of the homework task

- Homework tasks provide links between what has gone before and what is to come.

- Homework is appropriate to the needs and interests of the individual who is required to do that work.

- Homework gives pupils opportunities to reformulate, apply, and use creatively the knowledge and skills that they are gaining in school.

- There are opportunities for co-operative work, planning, sharing of ideas and resources.

- There are opportunities for pupils at all ages to present the results of their research and thinking to their fellow pupils. This may be individual work, but in view of the difficulties this may present for some individual pupils it can take the form of small teams who take the responsibility for some aspect of the class learning.

The management of homework by the teacher

- Pupils are given adequate notice of homework In primary schools, (particularly in lower primary) this may be the same day. In upper primary and secondary the practice of giving a weekly homework plan allows pupils to begin to take responsibility for the organisation of their own work.

- The expectation that pupils will take responsibility for their own learning out of school is reflected in the nature of the work pupils undertake within the classroom.

- The encouragement of independent learning out of school is underpinned by an understanding of the scope and range of possibilities that this offers, and at the same time a sensitivity to the difficulties which may arise for certain children.

- An expectation of independent learning is set in a context of support, and guidance

- Homework tasks are written down as well as given verbally (either on handouts, the classroom wall, or the blackboard).

- Pupils always know when they have homework and what is required.

- Pupils always know when the homework is due.
- Pupils understand the purpose, the scale of the task, the standard of achievement expected.
- Teachers offer guidance and examples of how to tackle the work, for example, by 'advance organisers' or by advice and practice in how to structure work.
- Teachers establish a routine and a pattern of setting, collecting, and giving feedback on homework.

Feedback

- There is as short as possible a time gap between completion of work and feedback.
- There is always recognition and reinforcement of good work.
- Work out of school is formally recognised in assessment and reporting in primary and secondary. This may include not just work prescribed by the teacher but work which pupils do of their own initiative

Monitoring

- There is a system for monitoring. This includes information on how long pupils are spending on homework, problems they are encountering, number of different tasks, or subjects, they are undertaking in one evening.
- In secondary schools there is a monitoring across departments to ascertain amount, distribution and balance of work being given.
- Learning support staff are integrally involved in this process.
- Teachers keep a homework record for the class, which can be shown to a parent, adviser or inspector as an indicator of the nature and quality of work prescribed.
- Individual homework is monitored through the most economical device such as a class grid with a tick for homework satisfactorily completed.

Inter-departmental co-ordination in the secondary school

- For every year level there is a policy which sets departmental allocation of homework within an agreed framework
- On two or three occasions during the year examples of different departmental homework tasks are collected and discussed These can provide an overall view of the quality, variety and balance of work pupils are doing, and may be discussed in light of seven criteria:

- purpose
- level of difficulty
- skills required
- resources required
- time required
- range of activities involved
- opportunities for collaboration

Communication with parents

- School policy on homework is communicated to parents through handbooks and special publications such as a school homework guide. These are most likely to be effective if
    - care is given to the quality of presentation, page layout and graphics
    - handbooks and homework guides are provided in the relevant community languages
    - emphasis is placed on the value and purposes of homework and different forms of work rather than on administrative details or school regulations
    - there is positive emphasis on the the value and expectation of schools rather than on admonitions or sanctions
- It is recognised that written information is insufficient and that a face-to-face meeting with parents plays a significant role. This is most easily accomplished at the beginning of primary or secondary school and may be made part of the 'contract' with parents on admission of their child to the school.
- Meetings face to face between parents and teachers are most useful when
    - Parents feel that they are are being consulted and that their views and ideas are taken account of by teachers
    - Teachers listen to and learn from parents
    - Parents are given help in understanding the needs and difficulties of their children at different stages of the school
    - Parents know how they can offer help and support to their child, and have some guidelines as what to do and what not to do in different circumstances
    - Parents know how to make contact with the school whenever they feel the need and are assured that such an initiative will be seen as helpful rather than time-wasting

Parent workshops

- There are workshops in which parents are involved in active discussion with other parents and get opportunities to talk about their experiences, or problems

- Parents work with materials, discuss and explore their expectations, clarify and modify and develop their views of homework and its relationship to learning.

- There is a sense of achievement for parents.

The School Board

- The school board understands the school philosophy and policy on homework, independent learning, and supported study, and is encouraged to play a part in the formulation and revision of homework policy

- The school board is asked to consider ways in which parents' response to homework may be monitored and communicated to the school.

Primary-secondary liaison

- Homework is considered as an integral aspect of 5-14 developments

- Primary and secondary schools share expertise and approaches to homework, paying particular attention to the nature and quantity of homework in P7 and S1.

- There are opportunities for primary schools (in particular the various feeder primaries of one secondary) to get together and exchange ideas and establish some common principles of upper primary work.

Supported study

- Pupils with learning difficulties and other disadvantages are given access, wherever possible, to resources within the school, for example, at lunchtimes and after school.

- Consideration is given to the timetabling so as to provide opportunities for independent learning and supported study.

- Parents are encouraged to visit the school to get a feel for classwork and to work with their children and with teachers, for example, in approaches to reading, spelling or number work.

Strategies for independent learning

- In first year secondary there is time set aside, preferably on a regular basis, for pupils to be helped with the organisation of, and approach to, independent work.

- Pupils are given opportunities to discuss and analyse their own experienceand approaches to study.

- Teachers help pupils to build strategies out of pupils' own experience rather than on some common template or idealised version of how people learn.

- Pupils practice techniques such as note-taking, summary writing, cognitive (or conceptual) mapping, question writing.

- Pupils are encouraged to monitor and review their own management of time and prioritisation of work.

- At the beginning of secondary there is an opportunity for pupils to review and discuss their primary school learning and homework, and to consider the purposes and relationship of in-school and out-of-school learning in the secondary.

- Pupils are encouraged to keep a commentary on their homework, for example, in the shape of a journal which records their own reflections on what they are doing. Pupils assess their own work and are given opportunities to discuss their assessment with the teacher.

Sanctions

- Teachers establish a high expectation that homework will be done by everyone. Failure to meet that expectation is treated seriously and pupils are given a second opportunity, and where necessary, the relevant support and help. Where there is persistent failure to do homework, a letter is sent to parents seeking their support. This is normally not appropriate for pupils over 16.
- Homework is never be used as a punishment. Failure to do homework is never punished by extra homework.

- Parents feel that the school is attempting to support them and their child and never feel that they are being punished, patronised or treated dismissively.

Teacher training and staff development

- Pre-service and in-service college courses treat homework as an integral aspect of learning, teaching and assessment

- Pre-service students have opportunities to devise, discuss and evaluate different kinds of homework tasks. Secondary students have opportunities to do this on an inter-disciplinary basis.

- Teachers have opportunities for consultancy and systematic evaluation of homework practice.

- Teachers have opportunities to meet with teachers in other schools and to examine alternative strategies and practices in other schools

Regional policy

- Classroom, departmental and school policy and practice are set within broad principles and guidelines formulated at regional level.

- Regional advisers and inspectors provide support and staff development for teachers in evaluating and improving their own practice.

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